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ABSTRACT

The New South Wales Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system developed its New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course to provide mature women with greater access to technical occupations by making them aware of educational and employment opportunities related to technical fields. The primary objectives of the course are to help women accomplish the following: develop an understanding of their social, political, and economic position in society; develop skills in communications, mathematics, and scientific and technical processes that are not traditionally part of women's experiences; recognize and apply their own skills and develop self-confidence and an increased capacity to control their own lives; and make progress toward further education, training, and employment within a supportive learning environment. The course has three strands. The work strand explores women's changing role in society, the importance of paid and unpaid work, the labor market, and work force issues. In the technical strand, women are introduced to the technical skills currently used in vocational training and employment (including mathematics, computing, science, and trade and technical skills). The communications strand covers language skills and confidence building. The central issues that arose when the course was taught at Gilmour College include the following: (1) considerable changes in the TAFE system are needed to enable the equitable participation of mature age women; (2) the simultaneous heterogeneity and homogeneity of this group must be taken into account; (3) assessment procedures should be self rather than group referenced; (4) curriculum relevance must consider the employment discrimination faced by women; and (5) methods used to facilitate learning could be used in TAFE generally. (MN)

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N.O.W. AND THEN WHAT?

EVALUATING A TAFE ACCESS COURSE FOR MATURE AGE WOMEN

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New South Wales Department of
Technical and Further Education
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SYDNEY 2000

September, 1987

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Wendy Richards
November 1987.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The NOW Course : History, Objectives and Design

Since the mid-1970s, both federal and state governments have been concerned with developing equal opportunity policies and initiatives, in particular in employment and education. In response to these moves, TAFE departments throughout Australia have formulated strategies to make their provision more equitably accessible to all groups in the community. As part of this recent commitment to equality of opportunity in their educational provision, several of the states have developed programmes designed to increase women's access to technical and further education. The major women's access programme offered within the New South Wales TAFE system is the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course

The NOW course is directed to women over the age of twenty-five who have limited education or outdated vocational qualifications who would like to undertake further education and training, and/or re-enter employment, and who are uncertain how to go about this. The aims of the course are "to broaden and give direction to the personal, educational and vocational options of mature age women, beyond traditional notions of what is appropriate for women generally, and facilitate their re-entry into education, training and, within employment, into those areas with prospects of secure and satisfying work" (NOW Syllabus, p.1).

These aims were formulated in light of course developers' analysis of factors related to women's employment, in particular the sex-segregation of the labour force, the high levels of unemployment amongst unskilled and semi-skilled women workers, the predicted affects of future technological change on a number of women's work areas, and the past educational discrimination which prevents mature age women from entering technical employment fields (Keski, 1982:1). The attention given in the course to technical occupations and qualifications follows from the hope that this focus will contribute to an overall change in employment opportunities for women at a time of rising unemployment, and of increasing redundancy in women's jobs in many industries (Fell, 1983:1)

To achieve these broad aims, the course has been designed around a set of objectives which will enable students to:

- develop an understanding of women's social, political and economic position in society to assist them in making more informed choices from the full range of educational and employment options;
- develop skills in communications, mathematics, and scientific and technical processes, which are not traditionally part of women's experience;
- recognise and apply their own skills, and develop self-confidence and an increased capacity to determine their own lives; and
- make progress toward further education, training and employment within a supportive learning environment.

The NSW NOW course consists of three strands:

1. *Work Strand*

This strand explores women's changing role in society, the importance of paid and unpaid work, the nature of the labour market, and workforce issues relevant to women. It includes workforce and training information, study skills, time management, career planning, work experience and industry visits.

2. *Technical Strand*

This strand provides an introduction to technical skills currently used in vocational training and employment, and includes mathematics and computing, science and laboratory methods, and technical skills such as technical drawing, carpentry, electronics, mechanical engineering and horticulture.

3. *Communications Strand*

This strand covers language skills, particularly reading and writing, and confidence building.

Programmes similar in objectives, content and delivery to the NOW course are also offered by TAFE in South Australia, Victoria, ACT, Western Australia and Tasmania. In New South Wales, the NOW course began in 1982 at three TAFE colleges. By 1986 over eighty courses were offered at both metropolitan and country colleges. The course is now offered in four formats to meet the needs of particular groups of women: NOW Base, NOW for Aboriginal women, women of non-English background, and deaf women. The course is a full-time eighteen week course conducted over sixteen hours per week. It is a Stream 2100 course, and students are eligible to apply for a TEAS allowance.

2. The NOW Evaluation

2.1 Research Design and Methodology

Several evaluations of NOW courses in New South Wales and other states had been conducted prior to the development of the evaluation which is the subject of this report. In 1983, the first NOW evaluation in New South Wales, based on self and course co-ordinator administered questionnaires, found that students for the course were being drawn from the target group, and that their responses to the course were generally positive (Fell, 1983). Unfortunately the evaluation was severely hampered by methodological difficulties such as low response rates, non-comparability across research instruments and too small a final sample to make statistical analysis possible. While many of these difficulties were attributable to the newness of the course at the time of research, the result of this research was a very limited evaluation of the course. No interviews were conducted with either students or staff to research questions such as the effectiveness of the teaching strategies, the relevance of the curriculum, and the nature of relationships amongst students and their effect on course outcomes. Evaluations had also been completed of the Western Australian, Victorian and South Australian TAFE women's access programmes (Pine, 1985; Jenkins, 1984; Jones, 1983 respectively). However, in terms of their relevance to the current New South Wales evaluation, these were conducted within differing TAFE systems, upon different combinations of access programmes, with variations in their research objectives and choice of respondents.

Despite these variations in methodology, focus and research subjects however, these previous evaluations produced important and useful findings and conclusions which were taken into account in the design and execution of the New South Wales evaluation discussed here. Each evaluation nominated childcare, timetabling, accessibility and income support as central issues in the successful establishment and maintenance of women's access programmes. In addition, these findings were supported by the conclusions drawn by Pocock in her 1985 draft review of strategies for improving access and equity in education for women within the TAFE system, at both the national and state levels. However, although each of these evaluations arrived at similar findings in terms of the factors which influence the success or otherwise of women's access programmes, none of them could give a detailed account of how these factors worked from the students' experience of them. It was also beyond the scope of these previous evaluations to draw a broader picture of an established women's access course offered across extensive areas of a state system. Thus the New South Wales course providers had little systematically collated information, either from New South Wales or from experiences in other states, about those issues considered central to the NOW programme. Those issues were:

- the effectiveness of the course in facilitating students' re-entry into work or further study;
- the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of the students;
- the effectiveness of the teaching and learning techniques employed in the programme; and
- the composition of the target group.

During the design stages of this evaluation of the NOW course, it was felt that an evaluation based on a statewide examination of the target group and course outcomes, and at the same time a detailed and intensive investigation into the day-to-day processes of the course and the women's experiences of these, would provide a greater understanding of all aspects of the NOW course than had been possible in previous evaluations. It was decided that the most effective technique for obtaining an overall picture of the students and the outcomes of the course would be a series of standardised questionnaires. However, a detailed examination of students' responses to the course over its eighteen weeks duration would require a different methodology, one which allowed access to the day-to-day environment and activities of the course. Thus the evaluation was designed as a two part project. Part 1 was a survey of all course participants in New South Wales over the two year period from Semester 2, 1984 to Semester 1, 1986. During that period, questionnaires self-administered by students at the beginning, the end and six months after completion of the course collected data designed to:

- construct a socio-economic, educational and vocational profile of both applicants and enrollees;
- examine the extent of unmet demand for the course, and whether the course caters for those who could benefit most from it;
- compare students' aspirations at the beginning, the end and six months after completion of the course, to measure the effect of the course on students' future plans;
- examine students' responses to the course overall, and its various components; and
- compare the four NOW formats according to the factors outlined above.

While it was felt that questionnaires administered at particular points during and after the course would obtain standardised and statistically meaningful data about all participants throughout the state, a technique such as this could not uncover the dynamics, interactions and processes which evolve throughout the course, and which according to anecdotal reports from teachers and students, appear to contribute significantly to its outcomes. Course providers wished to learn more about the processes of change which occur amongst students during the course, the interactions amongst students and between students and teachers, the relationships between the women's lives outside the course, both past and present, and their experiences in the course, and the ways in which mature age women learn and how they define what is relevant to them in learning. It was felt that the most useful and appropriate methods to investigate these issues would be those which enabled the researcher to become a part of the research setting and thus responsive to those participating in the course and to events as they unfolded. The research methodology also needed to be amenable to changes in the overall design if necessary, capable of being sustained over a long period, and of reaching a variety of sources of data. (A further consideration of some of the issues relating to the evaluation methodology is given in Richards, forthcoming.)

To evaluate the effectiveness of the NOW programme in terms of the four central issues outlined earlier it was considered necessary to satisfy these methodological requirements. Since this is possible with the techniques of observation, participant observation, open ended interviews and informal discussions, the second stage of the evaluation was designed along these lines. Thus Part 2, which sought to understand the effectiveness of the course from the perspective of students, was developed as an ethnographic study of the NOW course at Gilmour College in Sydney in Semester 1, 1986. (The names of the college and all those who were students in the NOW course in which the evaluation fieldwork was conducted are fictitious). This component of the project was funded by the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development. Unfortunately, however, during the four and a half months of the course, access to the group at Gilmour TAFE proved to be rather limited, which considerably restricted the scope of interaction with the students and thus the range of data gathering opportunities. Because of these limitations, methodologically the evaluation became a case study rather than an ethnography, relying on a combination of participant observation during part of the course, and in-depth interviews with students during and after the course.

2.2 The Fieldwork College : Gilmour College of TAFE

One of the first steps in the lead-up to fieldwork involved the selection of the college within which this would be carried out. Initially it was felt that the fieldwork college should be that college whose NOW Base course and students were most representative of the NOW Base courses in all TAFE colleges in NSW. However, analysis of the statewide data obtained in Part 1 showed that all colleges offering the NOW Base course had drawn enrollees from the group of women for whom the course had been developed, indicating a consistent adherence to the course's selection criteria. Therefore there was no college which was representative of all colleges offering this course, as all colleges were similar in the composition of their NOW Base students and curriculum. Thus it was decided that the selection of the fieldwork college would be based on the following criteria:

- that the college should have an established NOW Base course and an experienced course co-ordinator and teaching staff;
- that the environment of the college should enable the researcher to remain relatively inconspicuous (that is, a large and well established college, with a principal and staff who would be supportive of the research and therefore unlikely to intervene in its conduct);
- that the college should offer a reasonable range of courses, services, facilities and activities; and
- that the college and the area in which the students live should be accessible to the researcher on a daily basis.

Using the above criteria, the Gilmour College of TAFE in Sydney was selected as the college within which the fieldwork would be conducted. Gilmour is one of the larger TAFE colleges within the Sydney metropolitan area, and is set in an area of working class and lower middle class suburbs whose residents are both Australian and overseas born. The college has had a long and well established relationship with the community surrounding it, which is reflected in the class and ethnic composition of the student body. The college enrolment exceeds 8,000 students, over 100 courses are offered in a variety of full- and part-time, day and evening classes, and the college facilities are standard for a college of this size. Historically the college course offerings have been dominated by trade training, but there is also a variety of courses in areas such as business studies and community services. A number of special courses in arts and crafts, and further education courses such as day matriculation and certificate entrance, are also available. Although the college has developed over many years, its appearance and atmosphere are extremely functional, since most of the buildings and facilities were built in the decades before the expansion of the TAFE system allowed a less utilitarian approach to campus design. Although there have always been female vocational teachers and students at Gilmour college, the recent introduction of further education courses and courses for particular groups in the community, such as mature age women, has contributed to the growth in the number of women on campus. However, the thirty or so women in the NOW Base and NESB courses delivered each semester comprise an extremely small proportion of the over 8,000 college students. Courses within the NOW programme have

been offered at Gilmour College for a number of years, and the Women's Access Co-ordinator, who is also a teacher of some years experience, has been involved in the NOW programme almost from its inception. The NOW Base course in which the fieldwork was carried out offered Mathematics, Science, Technical Drawing, Computing, Women and Work, Communications and Confidence Building.

2.3 Theoretical Background

The discussion contained in this section of the report outlines the theoretical framework used to analyse the data obtained during the research at Gilmour College. The ideas and arguments which have guided the data analysis have been based on theories concerning the interconnections of the social processes of class relations and gender relations. Understanding the twin processes of class and gender has been one of the most difficult projects undertaken in recent social science research. Over the last two decades since the advent of second wave feminism, researchers and theorists have struggled to find a method of conceptualising class and gender relations in interaction, in such a way that the specifics of each system of social relations are not lost, that one set of relations is not used to explain functionally the dynamics of the other, and that the recognition that these are relations of power remains central to the analysis.

In the search for answers to the questions 'what happens in women's lives?' and 'how and why does it happen?', feminist writers have documented the personal and collective experiences of women, both now and in the past, from which to explicate theories about the nature and origins of women's consistently subordinate positions in larger social structures, and their experiences of power and domination in personal relationships. Those concerned with understanding the effects of race, ethnicity and regional variation have made connections between these and class and gender, through an analysis of the experiences of women from non Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Unfortunately this body of theory is too complex and comprehensive to consider in any detail within the confines of this report. It is also too extensive to reference adequately here. However, a brief list of texts which have outlined major theoretical positions would include Allen and Patton, 1983; Gallop, 1982; Marks and de Courtivron, 1981; Sargent, 1981; Chodorow, 1978; Daly, 1978; Mitchell, 1975, 1971; Rubin, 1975. Barrett (1980) provides a critical review of the Marxist feminist position, and Eisenstein (1984) a history and critique of the ideas of radical feminism. Connell (1985) contains a brief yet useful recent summary of both these major frameworks.

The three spheres of women's lives which are the central concern of this report are the workplace, home life, and education. There are a number of ways of thinking about women's experiences in these spheres which have been used in the analysis of the data obtained during the fieldwork. These have been drawn from some of the writings jsut mentioned. Again, because of the nature of this exercise, I can only give a brief exposition of each, and I would recommend all of the texts referenced here for a more detailed treatment of the arguments.

One of the central concepts used in understanding the relationship between women's work in the workplace and at home is the sexual division of labour, which refers to the social processes through which work is divided into activities and occupations argued to be properly the domain of either men or women. The process of allocating jobs according to sex is a dynamic and historically variable one, which over hundreds of years has involved women and men in struggles with each other both as workers, and as employers and employees (Cockburn, 1983; Gamarnikow et. al. 1983; Game and Pringle, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Beaton, 1982; Davis, 1982; Power, 1980; Beechey, 1977; Milkman, 1976).

Since the early 1800s, these struggles have consistently resulted in the 'ghettoisation' of women's jobs, which occupy a small section of the total occupational structure, typically in the secondary labour market, where conditions include low pay, little career structure and insecure employment (McBride, 1977; Barron and Norris, 1976; Olcott, 1976; Power, 1974). Thus when women move from home into the workforce, they enter a labour market which clearly demarcates what is women's work, what skills and abilities will be used there, and what are the conditions of employment.

Closely related to the social processes which produce the sexual division of labour is the historically recent distinction in the West between the public world of work and the private world of domesticity. Over the last two hundred years, in the process of dividing commercial and domestic production and consumption into separate spheres of operation, home and family became the 'natural' realm of women (Davidoff, 1979; Hall, 1979). These divisions were reinforced by the argument that the world of work is based on competitive commercial relationships which are rationally calculated, in contrast with the warmth, affection, loyalty and support of emotional relationships within the family (Pateman, forthcoming; 1983). The most powerful of these beliefs about women's domestic role is the ideology of motherhood (as opposed to "maternal thinking", Ruddick, 1982), in which childrearing is assigned to mothers on the basis of supposed unique and 'natural' connections between mothers and their children (Wearing, 1984; Davin, 1978). Many of these beliefs about women's role in the home still operate today, albeit in a somewhat different form. One important example relevant here is the view that it is now legitimate for women to be in the paid workforce, provided their childcare and homemaking responsibilities are not neglected (Game and Pringle, 1983; Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Eisenstein, 1981).

Despite the belief (and practice) that home and work are separate and very different spheres of activities, their structural interconnections become clear when women's private and unpaid work as childrearers and homemakers, and the timetables, work conditions and duties involved in this, are analysed in conjunction with the great overrepresentation of women in the part-time, casual, low pay, and little training sections of the public and paid workforce (Eisenstein, 1981). One of the many consequences of this interrelatedness is that women who enter full-time employment usually face a 'double day's' workload. They generally organise and carry out the majority of household and family maintenance duties, regardless of the hours already spent at work. Thus the occupational choices that women make are influenced by an almost intractable sexual division of labour in the workforce, and the effects of marriage and childbirth in their personal lives upon their lives at work.

It has been argued that "gender is a salient organising category in the education system" (Barrett, 1980:142), an argument for which Junor (1984) provides considerable evidence. Blackburn (1984) suggests that some of the mechanisms of this organisation include gender differences in participation and qualifications, stereotyping of students' behaviour, the operations of power in the classroom and the education system generally, the dominant place of 'objective' knowledge in learning, and ultimately through these processes the denial of a positive female identity. Feminist analyses have also begun to connect these discriminatory practices within the education system with the effect this system has in relation to other social structures, particularly the labour market. The school

curriculum plays a pivotal role in these relationships, as subject choices have great bearing on post school educational and vocational options. Women students in tertiary education are more likely to be in the humanities than in the science and technology schools and faculties. The end result of these patterns in higher education, along with the virtual exclusion of young women from trade training, is that women leave the education systems, at whatever level, with qualifications which exclude them from significant areas of employment.

At the structural level, it is possible to argue that all of these processes - the sexual division of labour in the workforce, the privatisation of domestic labour and its assignment to women, the belief in women's 'natural' propensity for motherhood, and discriminatory educational practices - provide the circumstances within which individual women negotiate their lives. These structural processes are not immutable however, nor do they appear in exactly the same form day after day. They work as historical processes, and are the outcome of collective practice. That is, although they may have an effect of their own, larger than the agency of any one individual, they do not have a life of their own. The problem in theory, therefore, which is also at the heart of the research discussed here, is how to talk about larger social processes without losing sight of individual lives. Or to put it in terms of the focus of this study, how do we speak about, or theorise, the lives of fifteen women, as they experience them, in the context of the wider historical moments in which they find themselves. If social processes are created by people in interaction (which includes both harmony and great conflict) how can that practice be conceptualised? To do this, we need to find:

> ...ways of talking about large scale structures without reifying them and about personal practices without losing their large scale contexts. To some extent this is a general problem of theoretical social science, which requires the development of an adequate theory of practice (Kessler et. al, 1985:35).

Understanding the women's responses to the course must begin with an understanding of their individual lives. Each woman in the group brought a unique combination of experiences, beliefs, ways of doing and coping, ways of decision-making, networks of relationships, obligations and responsibilities, self perceptions and material circumstances to the course. Individual and collective responses to the course can be analysed in terms of the dynamic interactions of all these elements of 'selfhood' and personal history, with the material presented in the course and the day-to-day experiences of being in it. The outcomes of these interactions, which are the outcomes of the course, would not be the effect of the course on the women's lives, which implies a one-way causal relationship, but rather the 'unfinished result' of a demanding negotiation, in which the women themselves are actively engaged in a process of change.

This process works intellectually and emotionally, at different levels of consciousness. Its mechanisms involve absorption, assessment, rejection, denial, agreement, evasion, redefinition, confrontation, risk-taking and experimentation, in a constant struggle between competing world views and differing personal and group practices, through which each person tries to work out her future direction. Thus two things are important. Each woman's active engagement in change involves her personal history, through continual

reference to the emotional and physical circumstances of her life. Therefore to understand this process we need to understand the women's lives both inside and outside the course. Secondly, as the terms 'process', 'change' and 'interaction' imply, this active engagement is dynamic and worked out over time. Thus we also need to understand the course as a history, of lives which have come together for a while and will go on individually afterwards, rather than a relationship between designated inputs and expected outcomes. The success of the course (if indeed we can talk about it in this way) can only be measured within the terms of each woman's life, by understanding in what ways her future choices (and chances) are a consequence of her activities and experiences in the course.

The second point I have kept in mind throughout this research necessitated taking one step back from the immediacy of everyday life and personal history. While there are also the idiosyncracies of personal experience, women's history is also a collective one, and I have looked for the patterns of this collective experience in the group at Gilmour College. Systemic discrimination, and women's responses to it, operate in the home, the workplace and the education system, which are the three structural dimensions of women's experience most immediately relevant to this analysis. I have drawn on conceptual frameworks contained in the literature outlined earlier, to understand the commonality in the lives of the women at Gilmour. Although there was great diversity in their lives and circumstances, these women shared a common set of experiences which followed from their position in society as women, as members of particular social classes, and particular cultural and racial groups. Without taking into account the effects of class, race and gender relations which were common to the group, the evaluation could result in a biographical analysis of individual responses, set within a rather symbolic interactionist view of group dynamics.

There was abundant evidence of the effects of these larger social processes in the ways the women organised their lives, thought about themselves, and related to other people. Tracing the patterns of these effects was made easier by recourse to certain well developed feminist frameworks of analysis. However, I found great difficulty in theorising the connections between the two, that is the dynamic and creative ways in which individual agency generates, yet is constrained by, social processes. Here I have found that the analysis comes up against the lack of a theory of practice which would be appropriate to the data obtained through the case study methodology used in this evaluation. Because of these difficulties I have looked to the words and actions of the women themselves for clues to theoretical starting points, rather than trying to impose frameworks which would, in the end, only alienate these statements and experiences from the very people to whom they belong. In this sense, the ideas and insights I have formulated throughout the discussion of the data which follows, represent an attempt at 'grounded theorising', in recognition of the fact that:

> ...the languages and theories we have to work with still lack the very concepts by which the experience and reality of women's lives can be named, described, and understood. Our work needs to generate words, concepts, that refer to, that spring from, that are firmly and richly grounded in the actual experiencing of women. And this

> demands *methods* of inquiry that open up our seeing and our thinking, our conceptual frameworks, to new perceptions that actually derive from women's experience (Du Bois, 1983:110, emphasis in original).

Thus I have concentrated on the women's experiences, viewing them not as the half thought out reactions of the powerless to forces acting upon their lives, but the processes through which individuals actively participate in creating the circumstances in which they live. Viewed in this way, experience is the outcome of creative, assertive and motivated action. I have also concentrated on the women's own interpretations of their experiences, in order to understand the ways in which they perceive themselves and the options open to them:

> Considering behaviour alone is insufficient to understanding women in patriarchy...the meaning which women ascribe to their own behaviour is reducible to neither the behaviour itself nor to the dominant ideology [about women]. It is derived from women's consciousness which is influenced by the ideas and values of men, but is nevertheless uniquely situated, reflective of women's concrete position within the patriarchal power structure...To ignore women's consciousness is to miss the most important area of women's creative expressions of self in a society which denies that freedom in behaviour (Westkott, 1979:429).

Mitrano (1981:47) argues that the first step towards the transforming power of education for women lies in making contact with their own experience in ways which name, validate and at the same time encourage redefinitions of that experience. Out of this contact can come new possibilities for action based on informed choices, new directions and greater self-knowledge. Reclaiming experience as a way of raising women's awareness of the common patterns in their lives is one of the key elements of the NOW course. Raising awareness then holds out the promise that each woman can become:

> for better or worse,...the full occupant of [her] feminist skin, engaged in the true business of modern feminism, reaching hard for self-possession (Gornick in Mitrano, 1981:47).

Following the arguments considered above, I have organised the discussion of the data into two major sections, Sections 3 and 4 of the report. This will allow a detailed exploration of particular aspects of the lives of the women who came to enrol in the NOW course at Gilmour College, and the experiences they encountered there. The first of these two sections (Section 3) draws together, over four chapters, the group's common and differing experiences in their families while growing up, during the years at school and in the workforce, and in their lives within their families as adults. The focus in these four chapters will be on what happened to the women individually and as a group, and how they perceived it. The section which follows (Section 4) then evaluates each of the significant areas of concern within the course. This section attempts to provide an explanation of the women's varied responses to the course by showing the connections between their

experiences and feelings at college, with those aspects of their lives before and outside the course considered previously in Section 3. Section 5 of the report contains a concluding chapter in which the major themes of the evaluation are reviewed and summarised. Through this discussion of the evaluation outcomes, a better understanding may be gained of the nature of the relationship between the learning needs of women from the target group and the content and delivery of the NOW course, which hopefully will enable course providers to assess better the strengths and weaknesses of the course. Section 5 of the report contains a concluding chapter in which the major themes of the evaluation are reviewed and summarised.

3. The Women in the NOW Base Course at Gilmour College

3.1 The Family Album:

"I was brought up to be a girl, see, and plus we had no money"

The oldest member of the group of fifteen women who enrolled in the NOW course at Gilmour College was fifty years of age, and the youngest was twenty-five; the average age of the group was thirty-eight years. Thus the women in this group went through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood in the decades between the late 1930s and the late 1970s. Numerous historically significant events occurred during that period, bringing about profound social change both here and overseas. Most notable amongst them were World War II and the reconstruction and expansion that followed, the baby boom of the fifties, the radicalism of the sixties and the gradually deepening recession that began in the 1970s. All these larger events and changes had profound implications in the spheres of education and employment which were also felt in some way in each woman's daily life.

The countries of birth and cultural backgrounds of this group was diverse. Angela was born in the U.K. and Ingrid and Sneja grew up in Austria and Hungary. Ranasinghe was Indian, May was Chinese from Hong Kong and Loretta came to Australia from Chile. Kay, Tanya and Julie were three young Maori women from New Zealand, while all the six women born in Australia were from Anglo-Saxon families. Although nine of the fifteen women were born overseas, only five were from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Nearly all of this group grew up in families where involvement with their local church was a regular religious and social event. Their religious affiliations were also diverse - six were Roman Catholic, three were from the Mormon Church in New Zealand, others belonged to the Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican and Greek Orthodox churches, and Ranasinghe's family belonged to the Brahmin caste in India.

Most of the women in the NOW course grew up in families where "money was always tight", which appears to have had great bearing on the kinds of options and decisions the women faced while growing up. With education in particular, it seems that each child's options were principally determined by the process in which one man's income was divided by the number of dependent members of the family. This weekly arithmetic always resulted in someone missing out; from nearly all the women's accounts invariably there was never enough money to go round. The process of determining who was going to miss out was influenced by a set of beliefs and assumptions about what sorts of lives boys and girls would eventually lead when they grew up. Beliefs about the 'natural' roles of men and women, which coloured the parents' views of their children's futures, seemed to have been closely tied to the kinds of work, school and family experiences they had had themselves when young.

Less than half of the women's fathers had finished any vocational training. Those who had were either carpenters, electricians or bricklayers. Most of those who were tradespeople appear to have worked with small contractors on domestic sites, or as em-

ployees in large firms. Few were self-employed, and none were large scale contractors. Angela's father was a carpenter and maintenance man in a small village factory in rural England. Rhonda's father was an electrician, and her memories of growing up in Australia in the fifties were not of the boom years of an expanding post war economy:

> Now I was your typical after-the-war baby and my family didn't really have much. The rest of the country were probably living off the sheep's back, but I don't remember that in the fifties. I remember we didn't have any money.

Most of the other women's fathers held jobs such as clerks, cab drivers, meatworkers and shearers. Ingrid described her family's life in a small tailoring village in post-war Austria as "poor", and Sofia's widowed mother relied heavily on family and friends in the Greek community in Sydney for help in bringing up her eleven children. By comparison with those early years, Sofia feels that today "twenty thousand dollars a year is a pretty good wage, right!". Regardless of their age and their country of origin, in general the women in this group appear to have come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. From their descriptions of their childhood years, each family seems to have had very little left in the way of disposable income after food, clothing, shelter and basic education had been provided for.

The limited resources provided by their fathers' jobs in the blue collar workforce were forced to meet the needs of comparatively very large families. The family sizes in this group of women ranged from three to nineteen children, with an average of seven children per family. Some of the women who grew up in small families remember their mothers' part-time jobs in shops and factories. However, in those families with ten, twelve or more children such as Angela's, Tanya's, Julie's and Kay's, the domestic workload effectively ruled out any additional income. Even if their workload at home were light enough to allow time for paid work outside, almost none of the women's mothers had any vocational training or qualifications. In all fifteen families, only Rhonda's mother had completed trade training, as a milliner.

The adult women they had daily contact with while growing up appear to have been usually home-based women with perhaps part-time work in shops and factories, or piece work at home. From their comments it seems that the only consistent contrast to these role models was provided by their women school teachers, some of whom were members of teaching orders at local convents. The pattern of family roles based on a skilled or unskilled male breadwinner and a semi- or unskilled female full-time domestic worker and childbearer was repeated amongst the women's brothers' and sisters' families. Like their fathers, the women's older and younger brothers either gained trade qualifications through apprenticeships, or went into semi- and unskilled work. Those who went into business for themselves were in small shops or local garages and workshops, while a few joined the armed forces. Very few of these young men were involved in any professional training. Fewer still of the women's sisters completed any vocational training, and those who did were mainly hairdressers and nurses. Within these families as a whole, it seems very few gained any professional qualifications. Thus the occupational role models most of the women grew up with within their families involved fathers and brothers who worked in skilled or semi- and unskilled jobs, and mothers and sisters who became full-time mothers and housekeepers.

In terms of class and education, Ranasinghe's family background differed markedly from the rest of the group. Her family's privileged position in the Indian caste system could give her and her brothers and sisters almost unlimited access to education through to tertiary level, and a wide range of professional and non-professional occupational choices. Yet despite an economic security which could provide adequate education for the whole family, within her family and her caste clear distinctions were made between the nature and purpose of education for boys and girls. After a suitable education, daughters of families in Ranasinghe's caste moved from their parents' home to their parents-in-law, to fulfil their function as companions to their husbands and bearers of their children.

Within the group as a whole, it appears that the effect of these family patterns was felt most strongly in the women's lives during their high school years. It was during this period that both parents and their daughters worked out how the transition from being young girls at school to young women in the workforce would be made. The two greatest influences on the women's educational opportunities beyond primary school and early high school seem to have been their father's income, and the presence of sons in the family. The family expectations that sons grow up to become major providers, and daughters to be wives and caregivers, meant in most cases that money was set aside for the post-secondary education of the boys in the family, but not the girls. Ingrid's parents' decision that her education would end when she was fifteen years old was determined largely by lack of money in a large family:

> Well, I was the youngest of eight children and...because I was rather bright my teacher asked my mother am I going on. My mother says, 'You must be joking! She can't go on anywhere...I can't afford it'. And he says, 'It cost any money if I get her into the state school'. 'Oh yes', she says, 'there'll be books, and I can't even get her decent clothes to go there'. Then she says, 'She's learnt enough when she's finished with you'. So that was it, I finished!

As well as the family's struggle to make ends meet during and after the war years, there was also no precedent in Ingrid's family of education past early high school, either for boys or girls:

> There was no way they could afford it. And anyway, no-one else went on, so my mother says, 'Why should you?'. The four boys all did a trade after school...and my sisters had to do sewing and farming [and things like that] during the war...the government made them. And [then] they were all married...They didn't really do much, you know, though you can't call them stupid. It's just...

Rhonda's family made the same decision as many other families with limited resources for their childrens' education, and provided for their sons' futures rather than that of their daughter. The basis of this decision was the assumption that eventually Rhonda's husband would provide for her, in the same way that her brothers would provide for their wives. This decision was made in spite of her proven greater ability at school:

> See, that's a sore subject you bring up. After sixth class all my girlfriends went to the big college, but we couldn't afford that. But the boys, my brothers, they went to a big college. But because I was a girl, even though out of all of us I was the only one to go past the Intermediate, I didn't get to go. [Then] I got Honours, right, in typing and everything else, and the next step would've been for me to go to business college, right, which we couldn't afford. That was twice...Then high school to get your Leaving since no business college - we couldn't afford that either! All the way through, see, it's always been, 'We can't afford it'. Yet the boys went to the big school, oh we could afford that, and then did nothing with it! So, in the end I got a job with the council doing clerical...

Not all families of women in this group made decisions about their children's education on the basis of gender rather than individual abilities or interests. Yet even in the one or two families who gave their daughters as much encouragement in as many options as their sons, money proved to be the final arbiter in decisions about education. The irony of Angela's teenage years was that her father's death took away not only the person who most encouraged her to stay at school, but also the principal means of her doing so. His death then set her on the same path that he was urging her to avoid, the one which in their part of the world inevitably led to the factory door:

> My father, he always said I was going on in school, and he used to make me do more homework. He used to call me and lecture me, especially if he'd had a few drinks, lecture me all the time about staying at school. See, my father was brainy, didn't have a great education, but he was very cluey, and he always used to say, 'You're staying at school'. Then he died when I was thirteen...and my brother and sister both got married that year so no wages coming in from them...And my other brother needed books and things even though he got a scholarship to university. He said he'd quit and get a job, but we said no. So there was only Joanie and me to earn...so we said *we'd* [leave school] and get a job.

As Angela and Joanie were the teenage middle children of a family of fourteen, their leaving school to find work was an obvious solution to the sudden loss of three wages in one year.

Of all the women in the group, only Margaret and Ranasinghe finished high school and went on to university. Their experiences of this were very different however, and demonstrate the kinds of pressures related to issues of gender, class and culture that young women are under when they wish to move outside the familiar boundaries of women's lives. Margaret's father's income as a cab driver was not enough to provide for three children's education, without the help of the bursary she won to complete high school at

a convent on the "posh side of the city". After leaving school, and with her parents' support, she worked full-time and studied science part-time at university. The physical and financial difficulties she encountered in studying on this basis, as well as her sense of alienation from the middle class nature of university life and its systems, made it difficult to keep going:

> You'd work a full day's work and then travel by train to uni and then come home and study on top of that. [My parents wanted] me to do it but my father was a cab driver and we didn't have any money. Like, they couldn't say, 'Off you go and we'll support you'. And you just didn't come home and do nothing either. Like, my mother worked part-time...and you couldn't just get up from the table and not clean up and not help cook and clean house...They would've liked to have seen me have something, but they couldn't do very much about it...And I mean, I didn't even know where to go to find out about things [like classes]. See, none of my people had ever been to university, they didn't have any idea about it...and if you're not part of that world you don't know what to ask and who to ask.

Ranasinghe's parents' position in the uppermost levels of the Indian caste system gave them both the financial and cultural assets which Margaret's family lacked. The habits of learning and inquiry were central to what she called "temple breeding", the defining characteristic of their caste. However, depending on their gender, learning has differing implications for children in this particular cultural world. Advanced education makes sons more employable; as a form of dowry, it makes daughters more marriageable. The danger for Ranasinghe's parents was that in acquiring the learning that would make her more marriageable, their daughter might also become determined to be employed, like her brothers:

> My mother said, 'If you work, you will marry outside your caste, because you meet all kinds of people at work. This would bring great shame to our family'. She also used to say, 'There's no point in too much education, you are to marry and make babies'.

Ranasinghe could have worked after finishing her science degree, but working or not, could not leave home and live as a single woman on her own. Her caste position prevented it. To stop her from completing her Masters degree and then working, and thereby possibly marrying a man from the wrong caste, her parents "made life so difficult" for her at home that she finally left university just prior to finishing her degree. They knew that her determination to learn would increase her chances of a good marriage. They also knew that applying the right kind of pressure at the right moment in her academic career would short circuit any plans for independence. To escape the extreme unpleasantness they imposed on her at home, she would be forced to marry, the only legitimate avenue of escape for a young woman of her caste:

> But then...my parents pushed me into marriage when I really didn't want to get married. My family used to jeer at me whenever I opened my mouth about my studies. They'd say, 'Oh look at her, look at the scientist' and all that kind of jeering. They really put me down you know. Then after marriage...I always [thought] what was the point of putting so much hard work [into study] when here I am tending babies and taking in the washing, doing nothing all day although I was bright...For me it was heartbreaking.

Financial circumstances and family relationships were not the only determinants of future goals during the years before leaving school. With the possible exception of Ranasinghe, and Ingrid who at fifteen felt that marriage "left you stuck with the children, and I haven't lived enough for that", at that age all the women seem to have agreed that for them marriage and motherhood were the next step. Whether their parents opposed, supported or were indifferent to further education for their daughters, and regardless of the effect of economic circumstances and social and cultural backgrounds, all the women expected to marry within a few years of leaving school. This expectation dominated all others, and was rarely questioned. In looking back on those transitional years, many of the women were now bitterly aware of how limited were their choices. Although at the time leaving school at fourteen to work was an economic necessity she accepted, like many of the others who were in this position Angela came to regret that she accepted it so easily. Yet some of the definitions of women and their place in the world that circulated at the time made it almost impossible to do otherwise:

> Of course I regret it!...But see, at the time I thought it was good to go out and get some money, know what I mean? Fourteen! You just don't know anything! It was never put in your mind that a woman [would] earn. It was always the man was to earn the money. And this attitude...like, oh well you'll just get married and have kids so why do you want to go out and go to college for? And we didn't know any better then so we accepted that sort of thing. Yeah, we just accepted it. But now I feel sometimes as if I've been robbed, you know, I feel bitter...

* * * * *

It would seem from these women's descriptions of their families that the nature and purpose of education was closely connected to beliefs about men's and women's 'natural' roles in life. Like their fathers and mothers, boys would one day be the primary breadwinners in their own families, and after a few years in the workforce, girls would marry and remain at home to raise their children. Regardless of whether some families, like Angela's and Margaret's, encouraged their daughters' learning, or like Rhonda's and Ranasinghe's, argued that education was for boys, all agreed, including the women themselves, on marriage and motherhood as a future for girls.

While there does not appear to have been a tradition of further education for girls amongst these women's families, and almost no support for the argument that young women need vocational training for the same personal and economic reasons that young men do, there was also very little in the way of financial and social resources that could make this training possible. In nearly all families the number of children greatly exceeded the resources available for education. Thus in deciding whose need for education was the greatest, both the parents and the children subscribed to the belief that boys would need training more than their sisters.

Regardless of variations in culture, age and class, all the women in this group grew up in family relationships and traditions which made clear distinctions between men's and women's work, and social and domestic responsibilities. Although both men and women would marry, the housework and childcare which followed would be the responsibility of one person. Within these families, these distinctions, and the sexual division of labour which reinforced them, had great influence on the nature of the education these women received when young, and the work that followed from it.

3.2 School Years:

"They just said, 'You'll probably end up in the factories', you know"

On average the women in the NOW Course at Gilmour College left school when they were fifteen years old. Amongst the group, the average years of absence from school and education generally was twenty-one years, and individually ranged from eight to thirty-six years. Of all of them, only Ranasinghe and Margaret had had any personal and family expectations of further education. For most of them, the decision to leave school was influenced by their own and their families' definition of women's work and education needs, their families' relationship with education generally, the extent of resources available for education, and sometimes the effect of outside or unforeseen events. For nearly all of them, leaving school meant not only entering the workforce until marriage, it also marked the end of the role formal education played in their lives. For those who did go on, education after school was for vocational purposes, it was not to be an end in itself:

> I didn't know you could go [on] and not have to pay anything. I didn't know there were those courses at tech. I knew you could go on to university, but that was for all the clever people! I thought once you came out of school, that was it!

Just over half of the group were born overseas, and moved to Australia some years after high school. Regardless of their differing cultural backgrounds however, all the women who left school at fifteen received almost the same education. Apart from Ranasinghe and Margaret, they had all studied a curriculum comprised of humanities, domestic science, and commercial studies subjects, a strand of non-academic education often called the commercial stream. The subjects they were all taught were geography, history, their first language, maths, cooking, sewing, typing, shorthand and book-keeping. Only Ranasinghe and Margaret studied maths and science throughout high school until they were seventeen. The educational focus of this stream was on vocational skills which were particularly relevant to the predominantly female employment area of clerical and office work. Within this stream, there was less emphasis on developing skills and abilities based on conceptualisation, critical thinking, problem solving and oral and written communication. Whether they went to school in Europe, Asia, Australia, South America or New Zealand, these women were all taught subjects which provided them with skills for domestic labour and motherhood, skills for the office, and a range of general knowledge. Only Ranasinghe and Margaret received education past middle level high school which offered a variety of career options.

All the women in this group were educated in the state school system or at parochial Catholic schools, or the equivalent school system overseas. None attended non-Catholic private schools or selective high schools. Most of them went to schools which were close to home, both geographically and culturally. Only Margaret was made to feel conscious of her class position and family background as part of her daily school life. Her family's wish to have their daughter educated in a Catholic rather than secular school, placed her in an environment where academically she fitted in, but socially both she and her parents were always out-classed:

> I went to the wrong school if you know what I mean. [The other girls] were all graziers' daughters...and judges' daughters and whatever. They didn't know who I was, I didn't tell them my father drove a cab. It was sort of living somewhere you didn't belong...It was because there weren't many high schools nearby, and I had to go to a Catholic school, so I went there...My parents always wanted to come to things. [One time] there was something on out there and this fellow comes up to my dad and he says, 'Oh, I think I know your face. Where did you go to school?' And my father said, 'St. Joseph's, and he says, 'Ooh', [very impressed], you know. But he didn't know, my father didn't go to <u>the</u> St. Joseph's!!

The most significant elements of daily school life which seemed to have determined the nature of their learning experiences were their relationships with their teachers and other students, the curriculum they were taught and the methods used, and the physical and educational environment instituted in the classroom. According to the group's descriptions of childhood classrooms, the physical environment was dominated by the arrangement of chairs and shared desks in rows, which allowed teachers movement around the entire classroom, while students remained mainly in their seats. Organised in this way, the physical layout of the classroom placed constraints on the manner in which teachers and students communicated with each other ("There was some sort of barrier..."). The authority of the teacher was reinforced by this greater control over the common classroom space and interpersonal distance. The educational environment in class was based on competition amongst students for grades. A divisive classroom ethos such as this did little to encourage co-operative learning and mutually supportive group dynamics amongst those involved. Successful learning was defined as success in competition, which were the regular exams, and those who knew and understood had it over those who could not keep up:

> At school they didn't want to share because...if they share it the other person is benefitting from their knowledge. They have managed to understand, so why should they help the next one understand. If they can't understand it - tough! You learn...to do better than the others and not help one another. You keep it to yourself, because that way you look better, because you understand and the others don't.

The principal purpose of education experienced by most of the group in the non-academic, or commercial, stream was to prepare students for future employment. By early adolescence the careers and identities of young adulthood were already established in a curriculum which for most of these women provided training in only one of all the occupations, that is office work. The other group of applied subjects, domestic science, taught skills less for use in future employment than for eventual marriage and motherhood. In the decades between the late 1930s and the early 1960s, the educational argument that personal experience and daily life are good places to begin class discussion appear to have held little currency. The needs, concerns and experiences of students were not given priority in class work, and do not appear to have informed definitions of curriculum relevance.

As their descriptions indicate, the teaching practices of most of the women's primary and high school teachers relied mainly on such techniques as 'chalk and talk' with a limited use of interactive teaching modes such as small group work and class discussion, both of which can encourage conceptualisation and elaboration of ideas. Methods of instruction also revolved around the teacher's use of the blackboard at the front of the class. During these women's school years, the lack of mass reproduction technology such as photocopying limited teaching resources to textbooks, and prevented the development of class, small group and individual activities based on work sheets handed out during lessons. Very little specialist educational provision was made for those students who, because of difficulties or differences such as dyslexia, a non-English speaking background, or even left-handedness, could not fit the standard student mould.

It would appear that during these women's years of learning, assessment took the form of rote learning ("We used to learn things off by heart"). Students memorised facts, figures and passages of text for formal, written exams, which required very little self-directed exploration and research, and left many students without skills and experience in critical interpretation of ideas and information. It also seems that assessment of their work as individuals or in groups was very rarely undertaken by students themselves. Judgements about 'good' and 'bad', 'success' and 'failure' were usually arbitrated only by teachers, with little input from those who actually did the work.

Most of the women seemed to feel that their teachers did not wish them to be curious, questioning or critical as students. Behavioural definitions of the 'good student', particularly for young girls, seem to have been based on obedience and neatness, and quiet, orderly conduct. Although some of the women, like Ingrid, remember a particular teacher with affection, it appeared that as a group, teachers had no desire to share their personal experiences with their students as part of the classroom interaction, and no expectations from the students that they would do so. In general it seemed that students' relationships with teachers' during primary and high school were meant to be based on authority on the teachers' part, and deference on the students'. Margaret and Sofia were amongst the older members of the group, and remembered the obedient passivity that characterised the way they related to their teachers:

> We used to go and sit behind a desk, and you just sat there. You didn't ask any questions...There was some sort of barrier - the teacher's up there and you're here and the teacher's always a bit higher than you. We were in awe of them. We were brought up to be seen and not heard. We would never argue with the teacher or say anything vulgar or anything like that.

Although Angela "enjoyed school" as an environment in which she was "always in the main running", like many of the other women her relationships with her teachers were not those in which she felt she made much impact as an individual:

> I had Mrs. Thompson for three years...and she never remembered me. I had always had plaits, and when [they] were cut off...she couldn't place me! She used to say, 'Are you sure you were with me last year?' I had this for a whole year. She kept saying, 'Are you

> sure?', and I'd say, 'Yeah, I used to have plaits, I'm Angela McIntosh'. And she wasn't an old teacher...Finally she said, 'Yeah, O.K., I accept that you have been in my class before'.

Although the women in this group of students shared a common school experience in terms of curriculum, teaching and learning techniques and the nature of the classroom environment, some of them, whose early education took place in other countries, were also affected in their day-to-day school lives by external influences relating to the particular social and economic climate in which their country's education system functioned. Two women in particular grew up in Europe in the socially and economically chaotic years of post-war reconstruction. The consequences of these wider social processes were felt in the classroom:

> We had teachers coming out from the war and they were sometimes quite strange. There was one...we all adored. He was really good, we learned with him. But he had been shot in the head in Russia and at times he lost his temper...On the occasion he hit me I never said anything to anybody...because my oldest brother was shot in the head...so why should I put him into trouble? After him we had a hard year with another teacher who was completely incapable of teaching us, but there was nobody else to do it...The war had a lot to do with it, because everything was still in chaos. So many of that age never came back.

Although their relationships with their teachers and school friends were focused on a different purpose and set in a different environment from those at home, aspects of these school relationships seemed to have reinforced some of the interpersonal dynamics in their families. Both at school and at home, amongst adults and children, it was commonly argued that women would work, then marry, and that their education should reflect this sequence of events. Thus since their future goals were already known, vocational guidance was not really necessary. In most cases, their teachers' expectations of them as young women in the non-academic streams substituted for expert help in making career choices. None of the women remembered being given any career choices to consider by their teachers, or being encouraged to think beyond the offices and factories that everyone, including themselves, assumed were waiting for them:

> I remember only one teacher ever asking us what we wanted to be when we grew up, and that's when I was very young. I even think about it now. We all said, 'I want to be a doctor', or 'I want to be a nurse'...You didn't think about it, you know, you just answered because we were only kids...It wasn't even a serious question! Because it was drummed into us,...they just said, 'You'll probably end up in the factories', you know...Nobody ever told you about work! It was just...you left school and you took what was going...

Their teachers' expectations that they would "probably end up in the factories" or perhaps offices and shops, and their parents' assumptions that, like their sisters, they would eventually marry and have children, were reinforced by the views their girlfriends held about what was in store for them. Except for Margaret and Ranasinghe, who hoped for jobs in science and technology, it seems for most of them it was a matter of doing "just...what everybody else did". Ingrid felt very strongly the pressure of her girlfriends' ideas about their friendship as a group and their lives as young women, when she thought for a while at eighteen of studying part-time while working:

> ...they sort of said, 'Why do you want to do that?', you know. 'What do you want? You want to be all of a sudden stuck up? You want to be better than us? Why can't you do what everybody else is doing - marry and be happy?'

There is a remarkable similarity in these women's experiences and careers at school. Apart from Ranasinghe and Margaret, all of them studied the same subjects (a combination of humanities, commercial and domestic science subjects, with very little maths and science), experienced very similar teacher-student relationships, and left school at fifteen for work in a very small range of jobs. Their years at school were greatly influenced by similar expectations they, their parents and their teachers held about the role of education in young women's lives.

The differences in their school experiences seem to have been the outcome of differences in their individual circumstances. Angela's chances of further education ended with the death of her father, while Rhonda's education (and that of many others in the group) ended because of her family's perceptions of the needs of her brothers. Ranasinghe's and Margaret's chances of success in further education were dominated by their families' class position. However, although the interplay of class, gender and the education system affected their personal experience of school quite differently, the outcomes were the same for both of them (leaving university before completion). Ingrid's and Sneja's school years were overshadowed by the after-effects of the war.

Regardless of these individual differences in their school histories, however, it would appear that for this group of women, their years in education ended not because of personal failure in their schoolwork, or an inability to go further, but because of either the nature of the relationships within their families, or unexpected events which brought about a premature end to their education. It was also the case that many of them, such as Ingrid, Angela, Margaret, Sneja, Ranasinghe and Rhonda, described themselves as "bright at school", capable of keeping up with their subjects, and as students who generally got good grades. It seems that for these particular women school was not an experience or environment which left them with a sense of academic failure. Thus for many of the women in the group, it could perhaps be said that their school careers were interrupted in their mid-teens, rather than brought to an end:

> I enjoyed school...I mean while I was there, and when I got my holidays I enjoyed them. I didn't really feel like going back sort of thing, but I never had any real problems. I could hack it at school. I never had any problems in keeping up with anybody. I was first,

> second or third, you know, I was always in the main running, sort of thing. And all my friends were going there too.

Not everybody in the group left school with a sense of having been on top of things. For two women, Tanya and Julie, school was something they "failed at", a process they endured and 'hated" and could not get out of. The events which began the patterns of failure and frustration in their lives at school occurred early in their primary school years, severely disrupting the continuity of their education.

Tanya lost a year in primary school in New Zealand through a protracted illness when she was eight. Julie's father's work as a meatworker and shearer meant numerous moves, and numerous schools, for the family of nineteen children. With each change in school, it became increasingly difficult for Julie to keep up with her age group. Both were put back in class, until finally Tanya was in a class below her younger sister, and both were fearful of the label "dumb". Although they eventually went on to high school, neither were sufficiently literate or numerate to make their high school years anything but a painful and pointless token attempt:

> ...by the time high school came the teachers more or less had to send me on because I was too old. And when I got [there] I just, honestly, I didn't know where I was going so I just didn't bother. I'd try, but it didn't make any difference...so all I did was get into mischief and play up. And then I'd feel sorry for Mum and Dad and all the things they'd have to buy me...By the time I got to high school I was lost, you know, I really was, I was absolutely lost. I really didn't know what I was learning, it was just too fast for me...I didn't know what level I was at, and I really thought there was no hope.

From their descriptions of those early years, it seems that for them learning was dominated by the school practice of putting students back a grade rather than providing special classes for special needs, the daily routine of coping with standard reading, writing and mathematics in class while functionally illiterate and innumerate, and the shame and anxiety of being "absolutely lost". These pressures produced in their behaviour a set of strategies designed to hide the steadily increasing size of the problem, and formed the basis of their responses to teachers and other students:

> ...it got to the point where I was too embarrassed to say that I didn't know, and put my hand up in front of the class and say so...I was so far behind anyway that I didn't speak out and say anything because I didn't want to be put aside and treated as someone a bit slow...[And when the teacher said] 'Does everybody know it?', I'd just agree and say, 'Yeah, I know it'...What could I do? It would've taken them months and they just would've kept me back anyway.

Their relationships with teachers seem to have differed greatly from those developed by the rest of the group. Teachers were not only people of authority, for Tanya and Julie they were also people in a unique position to cause them great humiliation. Their relationships with their teachers were overshadowed by fear of exposure before the rest of the class, and anger, distress and an increase in self-doubt whenever it happened:

> One teacher...did the same thing that my other teacher did - he embarrassed me! He told me to answer this question and I didn't know the answer. I told him I didn't know and he got angry and asked again. And I told him again, 'I don't know'. So he yelled at me, so then I got really angry. I abused him, I kicked my chair and I grabbed my table and I threw it and ran out of the room. He came running after me...'Oh no [you don't]', he said, 'Come back here'. He got right behind me, and I got out the door and slammed it right in his face! And then I ran...I must've been about twelve, and [it was like that] right up to the last year of school.

Tanya's and Julie's experiences at school left them with literacy and numeracy problems which reduced their chances of employment outside the unskilled, low paying manual labour market. These problems also had an enormous effect on their self perceptions, self confidence and their relationships with others. However, while these educational outcomes were markedly different from those of the rest of the group, all fifteen women, regardless of age and country of origin, had had very similar school histories. As the following chapter shows, these similarities in education, particularly in terms of curriculum, were evident in the common patterns of their working lives.

3.3 Working:

"When it came to work, we expected to marry"

Depending on their age, it was between two and nineteen years since the women in this group participated in the workforce. The average absence from paid labour was eleven years. During their years in paid employment nearly all of these women worked as either shop assistants, clerical assistants, clerks, cleaners, machinists, piece workers, factory hands, domestics or childminders. Their mothers, sisters and girlfriends worked in similar sorts of jobs. Ranasinghe was the only woman who had never worked, while the other fourteen women held full-time work before marriage and either full- or part-time work after marriage. If they worked once their children were born, it was usually in part-time employment and only after the children went to school. Since all the women were mothers, their work careers had a gap of up to five years during their twenties and early thirties, while they waited for their children to reach school age. The women's status in the workforce after leaving school at fifteen was that of full-time employees. Their employment status in the years which followed was largely determined by relationships they had established with husbands and children. Since marriage and motherhood they had moved from full-time to part-time status in the workforce, to eventually no work status at all.

This gradual change in work status is not unexpected given the women's plans for their futures when they left school. They, their parents, their teachers and their girlfriends all anticipated that eventually they would have a husband, a home and children of their own. These expectations justified the role of education in their lives, and the place in the workforce that followed:

> Everybody had to work, that was always on our mind. I mean, we had to work until we got married, that was basically what...you know. Most of the time when you got married that was it. And oh! even if you worked after you got married, you got pregnant more or less not long after that and gave up work anyway. Well, that was the whole idea.

However, although getting married "was the whole idea", before marriage came work. Almost all had acquired office and domestic skills in the commercial stream at school, which unlike a purely academic stream, made them employable in their mid-teens. At fifteen, these women's job options were largely predetermined. As Angela said above, by the time they left school their future identities as wives and mothers were already well articulated and anticipated. Yet although the work areas they were trained for were also clearly defined, their identities as workers, as people paid to use their individual talents in chosen areas of work, were largely unexplored territory:

> Wendy When you were fourteen and fifteen, what were you thinking you would do with your life?
>
> Rhonda Oh heavens! I remember quite clearly. I didn't know, and I still don't know. I really didn't have any aspirations...I didn't really know much you know...I suppose I was glad to leave school and get a job with the council...it was a

good job because [it paid better than] everyone else. I just did what everybody else did. Everybody did the same thing, you know.

Ingrid I was going to learn a trade but I couldn't find anything. Because...I didn't know what I wanted to be. All I knew, I had to leave school and there I was.

As Angela said 'What do you want to be?' is not a serious question, when you're only being trained to *do* typing and cooking, and all expectations are that you will *be* a wife and mother. In the context of their lives and their relationships, even to ask was a gratuitous exercise, as many other options, particularly those which depended on higher education, were both literally and materially out of the question.

The emphasis on marriage and children, which all of them faced and nearly all largely accepted, seems to have made the process of choosing a full-time occupation on the basis of their individual abilities and ambitions a very difficult one. This process was not made any easier by inadequate career information and counselling, discriminatory workplace practices, a highly sex-segregated labour market, and limited family resources for further training for girls. Given the seeming inevitability of marriage, education for employment became an expensive use of time, money and energy. This inevitability also seemed to have promoted low expectations of job satisfaction. Like most other young women, they had come to understand that their real and most satisfying careers would begin later, with marriage:

> ...like I said, you've got to get married. Two or three years out in the workforce and then you were married. Why go for a career? Why go to study?...Once you were working, you worked, you know, but it was never permanent. You knew that when you got married - it wasn't a case of 'if', it was just a natural way of life sort of thing. You get married and you have your children and you give up work. You never changed your job for no reason, unless you got the sack or done something wrong. You stayed at your job. There was no such thing as changing your job because you didn't feel happy with it, know what I mean?

During the transition from school girls to young women workers, very few of them seem to have had the skills, confidence, expectations or self-understanding to determine for themselves what their abilities and interests were, and to then choose the work that most suited these. However, while there may have been little real self-determination involved in choosing roles for the future, there was often genuine pleasure and a new and independent sense of self in being a wage earner, and forming relationships with people at work. Although in hindsight the jobs they went into may not have been ones they would choose now, there were definite attractions in going to work. Angela's workplace was also a place for friendship:

> You should have seen us going off to work! Joanie would be on this side of me, and in the wintertime I'd have my hand in her pocket or I'd have hold of her hand in my pocket. Whoever had the biggest pocket we took hands. And Raelene would be on this side of me, and we'd be walking along like that, about nine of us, all our hands in each other's pockets, you know, in wintertime going down the road to the factory. And in summertime we'd be waiting, everybody waited for everybody to go to work. And we'd come home [in the middle of the day] and Joanie and I were the first to cut off. And they'd walk past our house, 'Ta-ta, see ya in about half an hour's time'. They'd go home and have their dinner and then they'd all come, one after the other all the way down, come to our place. Then we'd all go back to work together again.

For Julie and Tanya, moving into the workforce was a very different experience. Nominally they had both passed Intermediate level high school. In reality, their education had ended in their early primary school years. The options open to them were limited to manual work which required few literacy and numeracy skills. After the battles of her high school years, Tanya wanted to "stay home safe" in a large family of twelve brothers and sisters. It was three years before she felt confident enough to begin looking for a job. The effects of years of self-protecting camouflage and evasion in their relationships with teachers and students at school, and the barriers of their illiteracy and innumeracy, appear to have influenced not only the kinds of jobs they could get, but also the terms on which they related with others at work:

> I didn't really have anything to look forward to (after school)...but I'll tell you something - I can't believe (the jobs I've had)! Jobs you'd have to have a bit of brains for. I don't think I've got any and yet I worked there...If we had to (do any writing) I used to say to someone else, 'Oh, would you do this for me? I'm busy', or whatever, and just get out of it all the time. I mean I just bluffed my way into those jobs...but I only stayed there a short time.

Regardless of whether school was something they would have liked to continue, or a place they were more than happy to leave, for nearly all these women the subjects they had studied, the skills they had acquired and the futures they and those around them envisaged, led to a very limited range of occupations. Almost all of them intended to get work in particular sections of the clerical, manufacturing or services labour market. The historical processes of sex segregation in the workforce have made these occupational areas into 'women's work', which is typically low in pay, status and opportunities. Of all the fifteen women only Margaret had dreams of a specific occupation which was outside women's work ghettos: she wanted to be an industrial chemist. However, her attempts to do so foundered in the face of the intransigent sexual stereotyping of the late fifties and early sixties:

> That goes back to being a girl...I tried lots of times to get into industrial chemistry, and they used to say, 'Yes, but you'll get married'...I did try and try...I can remember going to Burroughs Wellcome, all around that way there was a lot of drug companies, and time and time again...they said they didn't employ girls because they all go off and get married. I can remember that one very clearly - 'All girls get married'. So then I gave that idea away completely and went into an office.

Although sex segregation in the labour market affected local job opportunities, within the limited range of available women's occupations there were clear distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' jobs. The best jobs were in offices, which were clean, comfortable and quiet, were not physically exhausting and demeaning, and offered career opportunities as well as status and some glamour:

> [It's] a good job because you're dealing with all kinds of situations. People have a tendency to put a big sign up, 'Secretary', something to be looked at as great, you know, good money, something in the upper class sort of standard...[It's] something that's going to get you into higher society sort of thing, a level up, you keep going up.

When they first went to work after school, office work was top of the list. But factory work:

> ...was the dregs, you never did factory work. And you didn't work at Woolworths either. Why go through all those years at school just to go to Woolworths. That was really the pits.

While for most of the women like Rhonda offices were the place to be, for some like Angela and Ingrid, there were very few opportunities for office work. The small town job market in which Angela and her family and friends competed for jobs depended on two major sources of employment, a textile factory and the local meat works. Working in factories in Angela's neighbourhood was an acceptable thing. However, some factories were more acceptable than others, and distinctions in acceptability were made on the basis of connections between gender and sexual purity. Respectable girls worked in respectable places, and respectable work was machining and linking garments, not working in a slaughterhouse converting pig into bacon:

> The bacon factory, there's no way my mum'd let us go there. We wouldn't've dreamed of going there. The boys used to do it in the summer holidays, but none of the girls...none of our girls. There were girls from town that worked there but...It was like a down sort of job, I mean. Oh! a factory job isn't the greatest, but that was one you never worked in...All of the women used to go with hairpins in their hair and a cigarette hanging out of their mouth, acting all the way down the road and me mum thought, 'Oh, no way', you know...That

was the way it was looked at!...You could probably call us a snob from the terraces, sort of thing, the lower class snob. The garment factory had a better reputation. You had to be really, really ignorant to go to the meat factory.

The events which had the greatest impact on their work histories seem to have been their marriages and the births of their children. Carrying out these new relationships on terms which were acceptable to them and their husbands, families and friends usually meant leaving full-time work for domestic work and childrearing. The practicalities of housework for two adults and two or more children, and childcare for pre-schoolers, also required one part-time, if not full-time housekeeper. In every family in the group it was the woman who took this role. Acceptance of these responsibilities meant that nearly all of them removed themselves from the workforce for many years. This acceptance was reinforced by the belief all of them held that it is important for young children's welfare that their early years are spent with their mothers. Of all the women, Rhonda felt this most strongly: two of her four children died while very young, one from cancer and the other a difficult pregnancy which ended in miscarriage:

> So then I started out again with the two kids [I have now]...see I really had no intention of going out to work. That took me all that time to have those kids, there was no way I would leave a baby! Even now, if I had a baby I wouldn't leave a baby, you know, in Day Care or something like that. I just couldn't do it! I think probably because it was so hard to get them I just wasn't going to shoof them off just for the sake of bloody money! 'Cause you don't know how long you're going to have them.

Just over half the group, Ingrid, Sneja, Loretta, May, Kay, Julie, Tanya, Ranasinghe and Angela, migrated to Australia from the U.K., Europe, Asia, South America and the Maori community in New Zealand. They moved to Australia generally as young single women with various members of their family or with friends. Ranasinghe was the most recent arrival, coming to Australia in the twelve months before the course, because of her husband's transfer in his work with computers. Although the jobs they acquired here were very similar to the ones they had overseas, in most cases the move from their home country meant a loss in job continuity and of friendships at work, and a new experience and status as migrant workers. Ingrid, Sneja and Loretta also faced the hurdle of a second language. Ingrid in particular found the harassment she received at work as a migrant very disturbing, and was acutely conscious that her accent was the clue which gave away her origins. She became reluctant to talk to native English speakers and eventually withdrew from the workforce to avoid such contact completely:

> You know, I'm not as good with my English, so I don't go out much amongst people...I have worked with many people who don't like migrants...and it will not stop! It doesn't matter where I go in any work situation, there's only got to be one. And I guess that's why I stopped years ago. I said, 'That's it!'. I had enough of them so I stayed home. I mean, if people want to pick on you as a migrant they

> can pick on you in anything at all. If you don't work enough, you're lazy! If you work too much, you're greedy! It doesn't really matter what you do, if they want to pick on you they do...You're outnumbered so you may as well give up, or fight, and I hate fighting! When I was first coming out I had fights, [but now] I refuse straight, I don't do that. For years, I haven't been fighting with anyone.

Sneja also faced the problem of learning English after arriving in Australia. Unlike Ingrid her contact with native English speakers in the workforce did not undermine her self-confidence. She and her husband were convinced that hard work, perseverence and thrift are all that is necessary in a land of new opportunities ("...you only have to work. Like us, we came here with nothing"). Through his work in the factories, her husband has been able to buy a modern brick veneer home for their family on a sizeable suburban block. Sneja's many years pieceworking for a clothing manufacturer in a small, cold room downstairs in the house helped pay the mortgage ("See, this is my sewing room. I was here ten hours a day sometimes..."). It also gave her RSI, and the loss of two fingertips from a nylon allergy. However, she has accepted this as part of the price she has had to pay, and remains opposed to unionised and regulated labour and working conditions ("But the unions have pushed up wages so high we can't compete. We seem to want it too good here").

Angela was the only woman in the group who migrated to Australia for work from an Anglo-Saxon background. She was also one of the few Anglo-Saxon women in the group who was not hostile to people from other cultures. She felt this was because she herself was a migrant, and because of her extensive travelling in other countries and her close friendships in the Indian community in London. She was very aware of racism, and has had constant battles with people who hold these views:

> It's jealousy, I can understand it, but it's not my way...maybe that's because I have travelled. I don't know which came first, my ideas came first or the travelling...I was always fascinated by the other colours and their cultures and I always felt as if you could learn something from them...I felt they had a lot to offer me, I was never jealous of them.

She also felt her greater sensitivity and opposition to racism were the outcome of a lack of prejudice in her own family, and her first hand experience of the hostility her West Indian husband suffered in London:

> When I took Dean home the first time, he said to me, 'What would your mum say about you going out with a coloured person?,' and I said, 'I never even thought about it!'. I never even thought about him being coloured and I was a little bit shocked, and I said, 'Oh well! If she doesn't like it, it's just too bad isn't it?' And when I brought him home, they all said, 'Oh, isn't he lovely!'. See, he was a lot slimmer and very handsome...My brothers liked him, they [went

> fishing] see,...he was very quiet and...they were all fascinated by the way he used to just sit there and it was sort of hook in the water, sit there all day. They thought it was great. So we never had any prejudices, never looked at that side of things.

A few of the Anglo-Saxon Australian born women, in particular Rhonda and Jeanette, were concerned about the numbers of overseas born people in the Australian workforce. These concerns were usually voiced in negative and ethnocentric terms. In their view, migrants are outsiders who compete for work with their husbands, and eventually their children. Migrants also seem to receive special government support in areas such as welfare and education, which is not given to native-born Australians.

* * * * *

In the years since leaving school, the fifteen women in this group have had very similar work histories. Regardless of their levels of education, whether they were currently in single or two-parent families, and whether they were born here or overseas, all the women in the group left work after marrying during their twenties and only half returned on a part-time and occasionally a full-time basis after the birth of their first child. In these instances the need for a second income was the major reason for returning to work. All of them, including Margaret who had clear career goals in a technical field as a young woman, have worked in jobs which have traditionally formed part of women's work ghettos in the secondary labour market. These jobs were low in skill, status and reward, and offered few career opportunities. For almost all of them when young, they and their families and friends hoped for "good jobs in an office" and if not that, then factory work which was reputable and relatively well paid. Very few hoped for work in the professions, and if so teaching and nursing were the two most sought after careers. None received any guidance counselling, and except for one or two, all entered the workforce with very vague career goals, beyond filling in time before marriage, and a very limited understanding of their individual abilities.

3.4 Having Families:

"Being a mother is a natural thing"

With the exception of Tanya, all the women in the group were or had been married, and all of them had children. All were married by their late twenties, mostly because they wanted to, to a man they chose as their husband. Sofia's marriage in her early twenties was arranged for her by her parents, and Ranasinghe's marriage was as much the result of extreme family pressure as personal choice.

Their families were all small in number (none had more than three children), and were made up of only parents and children. Their children's ages, and stages in education, varied; thirteen of the group had children who were in the workforce or at school, and two had children who were pre-school age. All of the five single mothers, Sofia, Kay, Tanya, Julie and Angela, cared for their children and homes by themselves, and in most of the two parent families also, the women took nearly all of the responsibility for housework and childcare.

From their description of their family lives, most of the ten married women's relationships with their husbands appeared on the surface, if not close, then at least mutually supportive. None of the married women gave any indication that there were severe or chronic problems in their marriages that would bring about an end to their relationships with their husbands. Rhonda's and Don's struggle to keep going during the months of their four-year old son's terminal illness gave their relationship great strength ("you either do that or you part, you know, a lot of the couples at the hospital just couldn't cope"). Ingrid, on the other hand, was married to a taciturn perfectionist, whom she said felt "any sort of conversation is talking too much". While he was a "good husband" and supported her in whatever she attempted, she suspected that years of living according to "his way of thinking" had dulled her more outgoing manner. Sneja and Margaret also described their husbands as "good" men who supported them emotionally, and felt their family lives were stable and secure. However, while their husbands were emotionally supportive, the women's comments indicated that there seemed to be quite fixed terms on which this support was given. Except for May's husband, who did not want her to work at all, all these men agreed with their wives returning to work, on condition that the women's work as housekeepers and caregivers to them and the children was not interrupted.

Whether they would have liked to have paid work again or not, all the married women seemed to agree with these terms. To them it was reasonable, natural and made good economic sense that their husband's place in the workforce took precedence over their own. Nearly all of the women gave high priority to the demands their husbands' roles as breadwinners placed on them and the rest of the family. Within the division of labour within their families, all of them accepted responsibility for housework and full-time childcare. Margaret was a little over fifty years of age, had married relatively late in life, and had three sons aged six to fifteen years. She saw her role in the family as wife and mother as an essential contribution to the family's happiness and stability:

> Everybody here gets on pretty well...and I think it's up to someone to hold the family together...If someone doesn't do it then I feel that's where the [family] breakdown is more likely to happen.

However her acceptance that she was the one who would "hold the family together" was closely linked to a clear understanding of her husband's greater chances in the labour market, and the implications this then had for her place in the family's relationships:

> Someone's always got to give in...I'm not guaranteed a job so I've got to support my husband to keep his job, to be happy in his job...He's happy here and I can make my life here, I don't have to go and do something else. [As you get older] you have to accept otherwise you're never contented...I can't afford to be discontented with my lot because I think it would put too much strain on me.

The strain that Margaret spoke of could affect not only herself, but also the relationships that had been established within her family as a whole. Behind this perception of her role at home lay the understanding that not only she, but also her family, could not afford her discontentment with her lot.

Like Margaret, most of the married women had organised their lives around the needs and activities of their husbands and children, and had derived their self-identity principally from their family roles of housewife and mother. However, the effort that they have put into their families over the years, which many of them argue is work they chose to do, had not rewarded them with a strong sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Sneja married when she was eighteen soon after arriving in Australia, and now had three sons in the workforce and high school. She angrily defended her many years of socially unrecognised and unrewarded hard work as a mother:

> I haven't been vegetating at home, I've been working. And if I put you in the home with three kids you would feel differently to everybody else too.

However while most, like Sneja, defended their lives at home in housework and childcare, they were also aware of the price they had paid in self-confidence and self-esteem.

An important justification for their work in their families was derived from the belief expressed by nearly all of them that childrearing requires expertise which is natural and unique to women. All agreed with Sneja when she argued that:

> Being a mother is a natural thing, isn't it? I don't think that men are meant to be parents in the same way that we are... They don't have that bond between mother and child, do they? I really believe that, they don't have that bond...Men are fit for survival. They must be made to be strong to live in a harsh world. They are ones who go outside and do the work and the woman stays in the home.

The argument made by most of the women that parenting is an activity for which women are naturally and uniquely suited seems to have greatly influenced the manner in which their lives generally have been organised around the needs of others in the family, rather than their own. Whether in single or two parent families, all of the women felt very strongly the responsibility they had as mothers towards their children, and that their children must always "come first". However, their commitment over the years to their roles as wives and primary care-givers in their families, and the reinforcement given to this by their belief in a natural connection between women and motherhood, had also presented most of them with an unresolved dilemma. It was difficult to reconcile their belief in their full-time role in the family with the desire many of them had to be involved in paid work. Rhonda left full-time work to look after her two children, yet like many of the women in the course, needed to work to bring in an extra income. Like the others, she believed that children are best cared for by their mother. At the same time she was aware that as a consequence of this belief, she had placed herself outside the workforce:

> I would never leave the kids to kindergarten or day care so it makes it hard for me to get a job. After school care only works if it works well for the kids, if they're happy with it. So I know I've got a problem when I have to go and find a job.

While the women in both single and two parent families had a similar perception of their obligations towards their children, those women who were single mothers had a significantly different perception of the nature and consequences of relationships with men. There were five single mothers within the group, Sofia, Kay, Tanya, Julie and Angela, of whom four were divorced, and all were in receipt of Supporting Parents' Benefit. Of these five women, all except Sofia were in their late twenties and early thirties, and were thus the youngest women in the group. One of the now unmarried women, Angela, had a steady boyfriend, and had worked to re-establish a good relationship with her ex-husband, the father of her six year old son. The other four single women did not seem to have any casual or long-term relationships with men, and appeared to have little contact with the fathers of their children. Although it seemed that at the time divorce was a difficult and painful period in their lives, in the years since then they had successfully reorganised their lives around their children, housework and being single women again. Their experiences of divorce, and in some cases, domestic violence and the need for support and shelter in women's refuges, had contributed to a more cautious and somewhat cynical view of the implications of either married or *de facto* relationships with men.

Since her divorce some years ago, Julie had focused her energy and attention on her children, and no longer saw a relationship with a man as a necessary part of her life. To her "male company" was something she could "do without". She argued that her experiences in relationships with men had contributed to an awareness of the greater physical and social power arrogated to men, and a determination not to let this operate against her:

> I've seen a lot of women in my life being treated bad, you know, I've been in and out of women's refuges...and [seen] women beaten and bashed and just kicked out of their houses and no place to live. It happened to me...My attitude is, no-one's going to put shit on me,

you know. I'm a woman. I'm going to stick up for my rights. Why should I be treated like a pig?

Sofia's marriage over twenty years ago to a member of the Greek community in which she grew up in Australia was arranged for her by her parents. She described the ten years since her divorce as the "best years of my life", and from this experience was aware of the different effects marriage and divorce have on men's and women's lives:

> Divorce is good for husbands. They get the money and they've got good jobs and they can easily get a young wife. Women are not in good jobs, they get the kids and they don't get the same amount of money and it's very hard for them to find another person to live with.

Angela was the only one of the five unmarried women currently in a relationship with a long-time boyfriend. Her past experience of marriage seemed to have made her very cautious about long-term commitments now, particularly when it came to living together:

> ...because I've been through it before and it was all taken away from me. It was never really mine. He said I hadn't paid for anything. I said, 'I've worked all my life until I had Andrew, and I'm still working even though I'm not getting paid for it'. He said nothing was mine. When I left, what I took I could carry in a car load of luggage, and that was my nine years of marriage.

For most of the women in the group, their attitudes towards marriage and divorce, and relationships with husbands and children, had developed not only out of their experiences during the years of marriage and childrearing, but had also been influenced by their experiences within their own families, and their families expectations of the kinds of futures their daughters might have. The development of May's commitment to her relationship with her husband and children, and her attitudes to issues such as marital breakdown, appear to have been reinforced by her family's and her own and her husband's long involvement in the Baptist church in Hong Kong, where she was born into the Chinese community. Her opinions on marriage, divorce and the division of labour within the family contrasted strongly with those of women like Angela and Tanya:

May — I met my husband in the church fellowship group. I waited for seven years to marry him because my father said, 'You must see if he finishes his degree before you marry him'. Then when he finished his Masters degree my father said, 'You must wait 'til he gets a job before you can trust him to look after you. I'm not going to let him marry you until he shows he can do all of that'... And

I don't believe in divorce. You must stay with each other and you must compromise. That's the way it is. You can't get divorced, that's wrong. My husband says, 'Stay home and look after the kids', and I do that because I want to satisfy him. He is the one who must be satisfied.

Tanya But what if he gets violent, if he beats you?

May Well you must know him before you get married. You have to find this out. That's why I didn't marry him for seven years because I wanted to know what he was like.

There appeared to be considerable difference in economic strength between the women in the group who were sole parents and those in two parent families. All the women who were sole parents were on Supporting Parents' Benefit, which, except in the case of Sofia, the oldest of these five women, severely limited their capacity to finance major requirements such as cars and housing. It would seem that all of the women on Supporting Parents' Benefit received intermittent or no support from the fathers of their children, and unlike the older women in two parent families all except the oldest of them lived in rented accommodation or housing commission flats. The four younger women on Supporting Parents' Benefit had ahead of them years of responsibility for their families, and the expenses of their children's education. These women were also vulnerable to the dictates of landlords and government welfare policies, had little security of tenure in their housing, and the least ability to accumulate assets.

Although the married women were in a stronger economic position than the unmarried women, their husbands' incomes were mainly derived from blue collar or lower level clerical and management occupations. Of the ten women in two parent families, only two, Ranasinghe and May, were married to men who had professional qualifications (in computing and welfare), and therefore had access to more substantial incomes and greater economic security than the rest of the group. At the other end of the scale in the two parent families, Rhonda's husband Don had taken a second job to augment his income as a clerk. For most of these women their lives had involved considerable struggle over the years to meet mortgage repayments, extend and improve houses often inadequate to meet the needs of a growing family, and provide for their children's education and welfare. With two children and one income, it was difficult for Rhonda and Don to add improvements to their fibro home:

> To sell this house now I'd have to have it all vinyl clad, and the aluminium windows put in, and the roof cleaned up to get the extra money...It's got the location though. Two clubs here, and we walk to the station.

A small group of older women, Ingrid, Sneja and Sofia, had the least financial pressures of all. Their homes were paid for and their children were either in late high school or already in the workforce. There was no longer any financial need for them to be in the full-time workforce.

Regardless of any differences in income within the group however, none of the women could afford to dress expensively, or go out regularly with their families to costly restaurants or films, and most of them had one car within the family. In the years since leaving full-time paid employment it seems most of their energies had gone into housework and childcare, and as their children went to school, some of the group have been involved in school and community activities related to the needs of the children. Many of the older women with children at school had "done my time" in tuckshops, P. and C. meetings, school sports and cultural activities and taking their children to and from various school and hobby related events:

> I did a lot of that kind of work. I did all those years with Day Care and I was in charge of a Play Group in my area and I went up to the school canteen and the P. and C. and the arts and crafts, and reading, and oh you name it, I was in it. I was doing all those things to do with kids all those years and now I feel I've done my bit and I don't want to do it anymore.

Through their involvement in these activities, many of the women had acquired a variety of skills in management, public relations, budgeting and forward planning. Very few of them saw these as skills that were legitimate, desirable or relevant in the labour market. However, allied with this strong sense of being unskilled in terms of the labour market was a degree of anger with the fact that the variety of work they had done was not recognised in the workforce, and could not easily be translated into marketable skills. This anger was then difficult to resolve when one of the sources of their unskilled labour market status was their own commitment to full-time care of their children. Rhonda spent six years as a Day Care mother, which she described as a "low paying con" which takes advantage of women like her who choose to stay home to look after their children. She has since found that this work has been organised into a formalised area of expertise, with specialist training and qualifications:

> Oh yeah I guess I did have stamina to do it for six years, but I did it also because I didn't want to send John to kindergarten. I just couldn't do that so I had him at home and it was easy to have other people's kids as well. But now I find out that you can do a certificate in child care and that makes me really mad because I've done all that work anyway, but now I can't do the certificate because I'm too old and it's all in the past.

While it is difficult to determine the nature and degree of their religious beliefs, all the women, apart from Angela, Tanya and Ranasinghe, described themselves as Christians, and belonged to the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox and Mormon churches. Their involvement with the church seems to be part of a well established family practice, both today and while growing up. Although rarely spoken about during the course, it is likely that church doctrines have had some influence on their

attitudes to issues such as marriage, motherhood, divorce and contraception. For some of them the church also determined the environment in which they were educated at school. Many of them have passed the tradition of Christian beliefs and church involvement onto their children, and like their parents before them, have chosen to educate their children within a non-secular school system.

Their deeply held religious convictions have supported one or two of them in times of personal tragedy. Sneja has consistently prayed for an end to her son's "torment and inner anguish" during the years since he was diagnosed severely manic depressive. Her husband's unexpected and protracted illness over recent years has added to her worry and anxiety, and drastically altered her confidence in her ability to cope with any situation. Rhonda's faith kept her going years ago when her life was an endless round of cancer wards, doctors' reports, and diminishing hope while her son was dying. During that same year, while in hospital recovering from the miscarriage of her fourth child, Rhonda's mother died:

> We were real happy and everything's fine and rosy and here was I in a little house and that, and then they tell me Jeffrey's got cancer...From then on in it was just a bloody nightmare...We had to visit him in these hot, rotten barracks where all these kids were dying. It was unbelievable...If I had to watch him lose his hair and lose weight, and knowing that he was going to die and pretending everything was alright, that charade again, well I'd kill myself.

It seems that being a "good Christian" was very important to Rhonda. From her account her religion gave her great strength during this period, through its promise that she would be reunited with her children ("I would've been a raving lunatic if I didn't believe they were there waiting for me"). However, in the ten or so years since then, it would seem that she has had to deny her anger at the pointlessness of her son's death, in order to maintain an unquestioning Christian acceptance of it:

> You know, you're not supposed to be angry, you're just supposed to accept things like that. Some people do and I admire their wonderful faith...They say, 'Well, that was meant to be, God wanted them at that time', and that's how you're supposed to react...God's little crosses! Sometimes I get really mad and...I could be a better Christian.

The unresolved conflict between her un-Christian anger, and her need for Christianity's promise of resurrection, appear to have left her with very little sense of control over her life and a deep distrust of optimism.

* * * * *

There were a number of similarities in the family lives the women in this group have established as adults. By their late twenties, all except one were married, and all now had one or more children. All of them left work once their children were born, and since then had remained out of the full-time workforce. The relationships most of them had with

their husbands and/or children, and their commitment to their work at home, had been reinforced by a strong belief in a natural division of labour between the sexes, and a unique bond between women and their children which makes childrearing the special responsibility of mothers. The domestic isolation of their work as wives and mothers, and their lack of contact with the world of paid work, had contributed to a diminished self-confidence, and a fear amongst many of them that they are no longer employable. However, there were also important differences amongst these women's lives at home. Unhappy and sometimes violent relationships with husbands or lovers had led to a small group of these women re-establishing their lives and families around themselves as single parents. Their attitudes to marriage, divorce, childrearing, and relationships with men had been greatly influenced by these experiences. These attitudes, and their self-perceptions, differed markedly from those of many of the women in two parent families.

4. The NOW Base Course at Gilmour College

4.1 Great Expectations:

"I know I need confidence, but I need skills too"

The NOW course aims to assist educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged women with re-entry into work or education, by providing skills and information in a range of technical, communications and self development subjects. It is argued in the introduction to the course curriculum that this combination of subjects is necessary to introduce women to secure and satisfying employment areas which are outside the steadily decreasing job opportunities in those occupations which are traditionally female. These subjects also attempt to redress past educational discrimination which prevented women's entry into scientific and technical fields.

Prior to each course Information Day, the two broad aims of the course are condensed by course co-ordinators into the few words of an advertisement in a local paper or large metropolitan daily. This is often the first formal contact women in the community have with the NOW course and what it offers them. The key terms used in most of these advertisements are 'women', 'opportunity', 're-entry', 'workforce', 'education' and 'self confidence', which signify the aims of the course. However, all of these terms are open to interpretation, and the meanings given to them by the course and by the students, for a variety of reasons discussed in this chapter, are not always the same. What the course aims to provide for students, and what students expect to gain from the course, differ in a few significant respects. Some of these differences are evident in the students' responses to the course curriculum, its approaches to teaching and learning for mature age women, and the role of feminism in the course content. These responses will be considered more fully in the following chapters. The discussion in this chapter will focus on the students and their expectations of the course, and examine the relationship between these and the aims of the course, and its assumptions about its target group.

Of the fifteen women in the group, twelve wanted to return to the workforce as soon as possible after the course. Of this group of twelve, the four youngest women, Tanya, Angela, Kay and Julie, were also considering further education, as well as re-entry into employment. For these four women the move back into paid work would probably be preceded by some form of vocational training. Only Sneja and Ingrid joined the course in order to satisfy their needs for further education. Neither of them wanted to return to work. Regardless of these differing future plans however, the great majority of the group also enrolled in the course to improve their self confidence and self esteem. During its first weeks, almost every woman regularly referred to a lack of self-confidence generally, and in particular expressed doubts about her ability either to get work or to go on with further study.

While vocational skills related to technical occupations give the course part of its educational focus, the future plans of the women in this group seemed to be focused on occupations traditionally filled by women. All the women in the group who wanted to return to work gave on their enrolment form some form of office work as their job preference. For a variety of reasons which derive from their past and present cir-

cumstances, office work is a very logical and sensible choice. It offers women like Angela, Tanya and Sofia a chance to leave the hard work in factories and shops they have known most of their working lives. For those women with previous experience in offices, it is easier to return to what they already know, rather than break into a new field, particularly if their absence from work has made them underconfident. It is one of a number of jobs the whole group, and their friends and families, expect women will do. For nearly all of them, it builds on skills they are already familiar with, either through their school curriculum or previous work as typists and clerks. Office work requires no long, possibly expensive and time consuming training. It offers career advancement and status in the move from typing pool to receptionist or secretary, it is extremely portable and can be very flexible in hours of work. It is also usually available close to home and public transport. For all these reasons, office work is one of those jobs which could fit in very quickly and easily with their current family and economic circumstances. Moving into jobs outside an occupational area such as this could present many of them with more problems than those they already face:

> Well, what else is there? What else can you think of now, without a degree or trade, what else is there? That's a dream, this is here and now, this is what I'm capable of doing. If I were young and hadn't spent my life working hard then I'd be able to benefit from some study. A course now would be more or less for self-interest, rather than to get you into a profession, which would be impossible. We are being realistic.

All of these women who intended working also felt that a knowledge of computers was an essential skill to take into the labour market. Because of the high profile computers now have in the workplace, and within their own families, all of them were acutely aware of being unskilled in this technology. For most of these women Computing was the subject in the course which would provide them with the most useful and up to date skills for the job market they were anticipating entering.

However, while all those who wanted work after completing the course had office work in mind, and all were eager to gain skills in computing, almost none had formulated clear, specific employment goals which related to their own interests and abilities, or developed their individual talents. Both at school and at work, many of them had experienced great difficulty in assessing their particular capabilities and how they would like to utilise them ("Oh heavens...I didn't know, and I still don't know"). Their decisions about where and when to work do not seem to have been decisions they made for themselves alone. These choices were often made in response to their relationships with other people ("You get married and you have your children, and you give up work"). Their long standing commitments to husbands and/or children, and the domestic responsibilities which followed from these, determined the time and circumstances from which work outside the home would be possible. Jobs as library assistants, teachers' aides or clerical assistants and typists, jobs that are traditionally women's work, suit these circumstances. Thus while all of them were clear about what they would do after the course, in the sense of what was possible for them as part of a family unit, few of them could visualise what they wanted

to be. Many of them expressed their employment goals in terms related to their anticipated function at work (that is, 'doing' terms such as Rhonda's "I want some part-time work doing clerical"). Very few expressed their sense of themselves at work in terms which acknowledged the important connections between work and self-identity, which can follow from the development of ability and creativity through work (that is, terms of 'being', such as, 'I want to be a lab. technician').

Of all the fifteen women, only two had needs and expectations of the course that were not connected with future employment and vocational training, or further education for self-interest. Tanya and Julie hoped that the course would provide a possible solution to their long and almost insurmountable literacy and numeracy problems. Julie had struggled for years hiding this problem from family and friends ("no-one knows except you and my Chinese girlfriend") but as her sons were growing older she was finding it harder to pretend:

> I want to do it for myself, because I have to, it's holding me back. I don't even know in myself what's in me, and I can't do anything until I fix this. But I want to do it for my sons as well. Because I love my sons, and I want them to look up to me and respect me, to respect their mum and not be ashamed of her. And I want to be more useful for them because they're going to need me to help them. I can't the way I am now. But I'm doing it mostly for myself.

For both these women the course represented a first step in finding their way back to the point from which they were steadily left behind in education. However, both of them described their initial reasons for entering the course as simply a need to "brush up on my English and maths". Throughout the course neither of them spoke openly about the extent of their lack of literacy and numeracy skills, or let it be known that there might be other reasons behind their joining the course.

Regardless of whether their future directions involved work or education, or both, all fifteen women in the group also enrolled to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the course to gain improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem. For most of them their low self-esteem seems to have been the outcome of many years at home working in a physically and emotionally demanding job which received little in the way of social rewards. Prolonged absences from the workforce had left nearly all of them, particularly the older women, almost convinced they were unemployable. Most of their relationships with other adults had been defined and limited by the requirements of their roles as wives, housewives and mothers. For some of them, stepping out of their daily round at home into the NOW course brought on the same emotional stress as going for a job interview. On the information and enrolment day, Rhonda spilt her coffee from nervousness and anxiety. While mopping it up, she confided to me:

> Shit, I'm so nervous! I don't know why...You know, I am the NOW woman, I am the woman this course is for. I am the average housewife. I've been at home for the last fifteen years and it's like I've been asleep, like Rip Van Winkle...You know how they ask you what

you want to do with your life? Well I don't know. I just don't know. What *do* I want to do between now and the pension. And last week my Lotto numbers didn't come up, so here I am.

The course objective to develop self-confidence and self-determination in students is based on the knowledge that years of lack of contact and experience with people and activities related to the workplace has an extremely debilitating effect on the self image of housebound women. It would seem from their feelings about themselves that this was certainly true of the women in the course at Gilmour. However, although nearly all of them had developed a generalised lack of positive emotional well-being and self-esteem from years of suburban isolation, many of them also had specific problems aside from isolation and under-employment, which lay at the heart of their lack of confidence, and their need for the course.

Although, as Ingrid said, she had accepted the limitations of her relationship with her husband, she also expected to be lonely with this silent and withdrawn man when he retired in the next few years, and her two girls had left home. In the past she withdrew into the family to avoid harassment and belittlement because of her accented English. Unfortunately, this strategy will have the unintended effect of keeping her at home in the future with an uncommunicative companion. A solution to this problem would be to involve herself in the outside world again; however she felt she needed greater confidence in herself and her English speaking skills before she could do so. By contrast, Ranasinghe was fluent and articulate in English, but her relatively cloistered life at home in India and the dislocation caused by recent migration had made her fearful dealing with strangers in an unwelcoming country.

Nearly all of those who were considering further education after the course were unsure of their academic abilities and their capacity for self-disciplined study. For some of them, however, there were more serious self-doubts. Tanya and Julie feared that their inability to read and add up was innate. Their need for evidence and reassurance that this was not the case brought them to the course. However, the difficulties they had in voicing these fears made their statements about their need for increased self-confidence very vague and somewhat depersonalised.

Sneja enrolled in the course suffering from the emotional exhaustion of prolonged worry about her son's and husband's health. She needed little in the way of increased self confidence, ("That's not my problem, I've never been shy in my life"), but a great deal in the way of emotional reassurance gained from participation in activities outside her immediate family life. Her confidence in herself was secure, but her confidence in the merits and rewards of the work ethic, and through this her family's capacity to control its destiny and circumstances, had been severely shaken ("...another tragedy comes by which is even worse...then you look at life differently, and think how can I rise above all this").

At first glance it would seem that these women's expectations of the course would be fulfilled by its provision of the skills, knowledge and self-confidence necessary to re-enter either employment or education. Many of them, however, experienced great difficulty settling into the course during its early weeks. A variety of interpersonal conflicts which emerged during this period made it difficult for them to become comfortable with each

other and form a co-operative and mutually supportive group. These difficulties were exacerbated by the pressures of moving from a self-determined schedule at home to four days a week of highly structured timetables organised by other people. Suddenly they were being required to concentrate for long periods on one subject, and sit in one place in the same room for up to two hours at a time. However, many of the problems encountered during the early weeks may also have been the consequence of a lack of congruence between the expectations the group had of the course when they enrolled, and what the course was designed to provide.

Almost from the first few days, nearly all of the women felt that participating in the course was increasing their self-confidence. This particular need of the course was one of the first to be realised. Many of them were unsure for some time, however, whether other aspects of the course were also meeting their needs, in particular those elements designed to help them re-enter the workforce. Their main complaints about the course were that it moved very slowly, it seemed to have no focus, and there appeared to be no links between the subjects which would give their learning an overall coherence and purpose. Throughout most of the course, of all the subjects only Computing, Maths and Confidence Building seemed relevant to their needs as they perceived them. For most of them Technical Drawing, Science, and Women and Work seemed both not very useful and somewhat irrelevant in terms of their lives and their particular needs. While it was interesting, the subject Communications seemed to be based more on commonsense than on a new body of knowledge. (A more detailed discussion of these subjects is outlined in the following chapter on curriculum.) During the early weeks of the course they also expressed doubts about whether they were "actually learning anything", and whether the course was providing them with the skills and information that their plans for future education and employment required.

This dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in the course was most often expressed by the group of nine women who enrolled in order to gain skills for the workforce. Although on the Information Day the course co-ordinator stressed that this would not necessarily be the case (a point often reiterated to the women individually during the Information Day interviews), many of them continued to expect for some time after it began that the course would provide them with enough skills and information to make them immediately employable. Rhonda, Margaret, Ranasinghe, Sofia and the others in this particular group were all in their late thirties or older. Since their children were well established at school, part-time work at least was now possible. For most of them, their awareness of their age, the problems of working full-time and establishing a career at this stage in life, and the immediate need for relief from financial pressures made education and training beyond six to twelve month courses a difficult and unprofitable exercise. However, these women were also acutely aware of their lack of skills and the effects of their prolonged absence from the workforce on their chances of employment. The problem they now faced was how to negotiate the necessary trade-off between their immediate need for employment, and the time it would take to get the skills that would make employment possible:

> I want a job. I don't want to study because I haven't too many years left to put into study, which is a problem. I feel like I can't waste time and years by getting qualifications, yet I know I need qualifica-

> tions to get a job. All I want is a short course of no more than a year, then I want a job and that's it.

To many of these women in the group the course seemed to be encouraging long-term study as the next step. At forty, Rhonda described herself as being "over the hill". Like many of these women she brought to the course a sense of urgency which stemmed from her strong desire to be economically useful at home and her lack of confidence in being able to get work. She became frustrated with the course because it could not immediately provide her with vocation oriented skills:

> I feel bad that Don has had to get a second job [because] we need that extra money...I feel very bad but I can't do anything to contribute...I really should be going to a secretarial course but for me it's useless at my age anyway because I'm too old now to be a secretary...[And] a degree course is unrealistic, I haven't got time for a degree course...And you know it makes me really angry! What are they doing in this course? Are they just giving us the confidence so that we can be unrealistic? I know I need confidence but I need skills too.

For Rhonda and for the women like her with years of financial commitments such as education and mortgages still ahead of them, the long periods of time spent studying for formal qualifications, usually part-time because of family responsibilities, was a luxury they could not afford. For most of them, their awareness of their age and their need for a reliable income that must somehow also be gained in a manner which fitted in with their work at home, made immediate re-entry into the workforce rather than long term study their future priority. At the same time, they were aware that some form of further study was necessary to make them more competitive in a tight labour market.

The four women who began the course with a view to later education as well as employment were all younger than those interested principally in gaining work. Kay was twenty-five and she and Angela, Tanya and Julie had a slightly different set of commitments and options. Their ages, and the ages of their children, influenced how they saw the years ahead:

> ...like, I'm still young...I've got at least ten years to do something with my life...I want to succeed and I want to have a good career and I want to be able to provide for the girls...I know I've got them to be responsible for and I don't plan to stay on the pension you know for the rest of my life.

These younger women were also single, and expected they would be supporting their children on their own in the future. Given their age, their childcare responsibilities and their single status, further training for a career rather than work for a second income was for them more of a necessity. Angela contrasted their needs with those of the older, married women:

> Most of [the married women] just want to get a job, a clerical type job, I don't think they particularly want to go on studying. They just want enough confidence to go in and get a job. It's mainly for the money, sort of thing. The girls on their own are more into getting a career out of it because they feel as if they're going to be on their own for the rest of their lives...I know with me I am. Like, I can't stay on a pension for the rest of my life, and I just don't want to go back into a factory.

These younger single mothers had a mix of expectations of the course. They hoped to gain skills that would be useful in the workforce, and at the same time test their capacity to study and to cope with daily college life. Like many of the married women, they also expressed frustration and concern with aspects of the course, particularly its failure to provide them with immediately marketable skills. In contrast with many of the older women, however, for this smaller group the course was markedly more successful in achieving its aim of preparing mature age women for re-entry into education. Through the lessons on study skills and vocational and educational development, they began to gain sufficient skills and information to consider options in mainstream education. The content and teaching approach in the technical subjects helped them begin to overcome anxiety and phobias about maths and science based knowledge and learning. By taking part in the NOW course, they had already made the move from home into education, and each day in the classroom strengthened and confirmed their new student identity. To this extent therefore, the small group of women interested in further education had a head start over those thinking of working after the course. For those who wanted to work again, the difficult opening moves of entering the workforce were still ahead of them.

Of all the women only Ingrid and Sneja, who were in their late forties with homes and children by now well provided for, did not come into the course for help with getting a job, either in the near future or after some training. Their concerns were focused more on education as a process of self-development, and on improving their self-confidence. Although both of them also found that settling into the course required a few weeks of adjustment to a new routine and environment, and like the others were concerned about the pace and focus of the course, neither were in any doubt that the course was helping them increase their self-confidence, and opening the way to new learning. Unlike the rest of the women in the group, neither of them would be under pressure in the future to prove their capabilities to employers and teachers, or to gain jobs or qualifications in a competitive environment. The anticipated pressures of this competition seemed to contribute to many of the other thirteen women's greater criticism of the course.

Although the course aims to facilitate women's re-entry into education, no special provision is made for those with basic literacy and numeracy problems. As there are few screening mechanisms at the point of selection, and no formal assessment procedures structured into the course, it is possible for these problems to remain hidden, and thus unsolved. For reasons which will be considered in greater detail later, this was an important element in the outcomes of the course for Julie and Tanya.

The early dissatisfaction with the course and uncertainty about its usefulness led to a critical lack of confidence in the course which occurred around the sixth week. The course was not living up to many of their expectations, particularly the hope that it would "get me a job when I finish". The employment areas these women were hoping to move into were not the ones the course was promoting, which caused some confusion ("But what does it mean to the people who are organising it? What does it mean, 'back into the workforce'?"). Its teaching and learning techniques were unfamiliar, unexpected, and contradicted previous school experiences ("I don't know why, but I kept expecting uniforms"). Much of the curriculum seemed irrelevant, lacking in direction and purpose, and of doubtful usefulness. Some of its content and the pace at which it moved at times were not sufficiently challenging ("I was getting really bored...I thought, we're not learning enough, we're going too slow"). The subject Women and Work raised issues and ideas about women's place in the workforce and the family which few of the women felt were relevant, necessary or even sensible. None of them had expected that ideas and arguments such as these would be a part of the course. Gradually class discussions became dispirited and rambling, occasionally students would cut classes halfway through the day, and some of the absenteeism around this time came more from displeasure with the course than from unavoidable commitments at home. Some of the women began debating whether they would even continue.

By the eighth or ninth week many aspects of this crisis appeared to have been resolved. Since entering the course most of them had been reporting a sense of steadily "feeling better about myself". The experience of making a decision solely in their own interests (that is, the decision to enrol), acting upon it and then abiding by it during the difficult weeks of settling in, gave them evidence of the ability to take control of their lives and make changes ("I've made it this far so I'll see it to the end. No-one's going to take it away from me now"). From class discussions about the experience and sources of low self-esteem and private conversations with each other, it became obvious that they were not alone in their self-doubts. New skills in computing and technical drawing and reawakened old ones in science and maths, were concrete signs of their ability to learn. During this period, one or two subjects in the course began focusing on important study and career skills that would be needed after the course. Thus the content of their learning became more relevant to their future employment and education plans. Sofia argued that:

> Well, see, it was something strange, we hadn't attended classes in a regular form, sort of thing, and it was tiring too. You had to go in and you concentrate and concentrate and you're not used to that. Then you walk away from that and you say, 'Now, O.K., what are we working towards, what's all this for?' We can't sort of find out what's happening. But I think there was something behind it, we didn't realise it, that we were unconsciously learning something in the process...I think we're all settled in now. See, we're not really going to learn anything to put us in another job. We've realised that now. This is only to help us to do further study, right, if you want to go somewhere...or we have to go somewhere to get experience and a job.

Most of them were going through a range and combination of emotions normally not part of their daily lives. While constantly experiencing anxiety and self doubt, they were also full of the nervous adrenalin and excitement, frustration, confusion, anger, boredom and exhilaration that followed the new experience of four hours a day, four days a week spent in an environment focused, albeit imperfectly, on their needs and interests. These feelings kept the women involved in the course even while they were worried about its usefulness to them, ("I get scared a lot of the time, but I like it. It's making me feel good"). They began to feel like students, and incorporated this new and interesting role into their self identities ("I loved carrying around those folders. I'd always dreamt of doing that and feeling important"). They also began expecting the rest of the world to acknowledge them as students as well:

> ...so I said to the guy at the railway station, 'Half fare to Gilmour please', and he looked at me and said, 'Oh yeah, and where are you going?'. 'I'm going to Tech', I said. 'Oh yeah', he said, 'let's see your pass'. So I showed him my student pass and he gave me my half fare. And I'm going to have to do this every morning until he gets the message. And what's more, behind me there was this Tech student who walked straight up to the window after me and got a half fare just like that, while I had to grovel to get mine.

An important outcome of these changes, which contributed to a successful resolution of the crisis, was a gradual re-assessment of their expectations of the course, particularly by those who hoped for increased chances of getting a job. It became apparent through the information they were being given on career choices and the appropriate education and vocational training, that a short, eighteen week course which covered a variety of subjects could not provide them with marketable job skills for immediate re-entry into employment. The nature and purpose of re-entry education thus became clearer. The teaching strategies of the course encouraged them to explore common issues in their lives, and by getting to know each other in this way they began to understand their shared experiences, and accept their differences. Accepting these differences helped many of them appreciate the variety of needs the course attempted to satisfy:

> It's hard, you can't please too many people at the same time. We all need different things. I mean if one hopes to get some skill in three or four months of this course, it's too much to hope for isn't it? I think the course is there to...show you something that you might be interested in and then pursue it. That's why we have work experience and Lesley is trying to point out professions and things that would be suitable to us...

Throughout the course, most of the group were aware of its strengths and weaknesses, and of each others' reactions to it. In retrospect, some of them pointed to the wording of the advertisement for the course, and their subsequent interpretation of it, as the starting point of some of their later confusion and dissatisfaction:

> I think too perhaps it was the way it was advertised. I mean when I looked at the advertisement I thought, 'Oh wow! guaranteed a job'...because that's the way it looked. Plus I also knew it was further education sort of thing, but to me it looked more like a job and pretty much guaranteed sort of thing...That's the sort of effect it had, to get you back into it straight away. But it's not, it's just the sort of one step towards it.

Many of the assumptions about the characteristics and needs of the target group, which formed the basis for much of the rationale and design of the NOW course, have proved correct. The women in this group did need help in making the transition from home to work or retraining. Almost all of them were underconfident when entering the course, and in some respects unsure about their future goals. The course was designed to suit their domestic timetables and commitments, and the absence of fees and expensive textbooks, and the possibility of assistance from TEAS were important factors in their decisions to enrol. To this extent, the course at Gilmour College and the women who were its students agreed on the meanings of the terms 'opportunity', 'education' and 'self confidence' used in the wording of the course advertisement.

However, as this discussion has shown, some of the assumptions about the needs of the target group, which were embodied in the course's purpose and objectives, came into conflict with the expectations of the students. Depending on their ages, backgrounds and circumstances, the interpretations the group made of the terms 're-entry' and 'workforce' differed in significant respects from those of the course. To many of these women, 're-entry' meant immediately following the course, and 'workforce' indicated areas of women's employment which many either had experience in, or were already trained for, and which suited their present circumstances.

4.2 The Curriculum:

"Are we really learning anything?"

The NOW course is a re-entry course, rather than a vocational or general education course. As such it functions to provide its client group with assistance in moving towards particular goals that they may not otherwise be able to reach. This assistance takes the form of guidance, information and skills delivered to the client group via the curriculum and teaching methods. This assistance must also be appropriate, in terms of its content and delivery, to the needs of this group. The second significant feature of these objectives is that a feminist analysis of the needs of the target group has provided the grounds upon which decisions about appropriate and inappropriate course content and delivery were made during the course development.

The analysis of women's position which has informed the course design and development looks to both the past and the future. The objectives of all the subjects offered are to redress educational and occupational discrimination working class women have faced in the past, and to enable them to deal more effectively with discrimination in the future. Thus each of the subjects has been designed not only to teach the skills and knowledge that are pertinent to that subject area, but also to teach them in a way which acknowledges, in theory and in practice, what part those skills and knowledge play in women's lives generally. While a centrally devised curriculum forms the basis of all NOW courses, teachers are encouraged to use the curriculum flexibly in order to respond to local needs, and to any changes which may occur during the progress of a course.

The Technical Strand subjects provide an introduction to technical skills currently used in vocational training and employment. They have also been designed to overcome unfamiliarity, anxiety and phobias about areas such as mathematics, computing and science, that often result from the discriminatory and mystifying way many women are taught these subjects during their primary and high school education. The Communications Strand was designed to develop confidence and expertise in all forms of communications, as well as an awareness of the role of language and communication in the stereotyping of women. This strand also seeks to help women develop a broader, more positive and assertive self-image and self-esteem. The Work Strand of the course provides students with information and ideas which will develop an understanding of the common patterns in women's experience, and thus to appreciate how discrimination has worked against them in their own lives, in the family, education and employment. This overall combination of career and study skills and information, technical skills, and a feminist understanding of women's position in society hopefully provides the basis for more informed decisions students may make about future goals. The course assumes that this curriculum and delivery will help women take steps to make themselves less vulnerable to labour market fluctuations, and therefore less economically insecure.

A commonly used, and perhaps the most direct method of determining whether a curriculum meets its objectives is to examine the work students submit for assessment. However, as the NOW course is a re-entry course and therefore not obliged to have its students meet any accreditation standards or requirements, there are no standardised, centralised or documented assessment procedures for this course. The students do re-

ceive feedback from teachers on their progress during the eighteen weeks, but the methods used to do this are not those which could provide objective measures either of students' mastery of skills, or of their progress in each subject as individuals or as a group. There are no prescribed tests, exams, written or oral assignments or practical work which measure students' progress within this course. Thus the evaluation of the course's capacity to meet its objectives relies on students' and teachers' perceptions of students' progress. As the following discussion shows, the relevance of the curriculum to their immediate needs proved to be the litmus test by which the women in the group assessed the usefulness of each of the subjects, and the course overall.

Throughout the course the most popular and sought after subjects were Computing and Confidence Building ("My main reason for doing the course"). Computing was extremely popular with the entire group, because of its vocationally relevant skills, its connection with old keyboarding and office skills learnt at high school in the commercial stream, the hands-on nature of the course, and the immediate reward of skills mastery after each contact with the terminal. More than any other in the syllabus, this subject demystifies modern technology, helps overcome phobias about technical equipment, and makes students feel up-to-date and in touch with a highly publicised area of social change normally outside their lives ("...[I was] frightened of going to any machine, what if I do something wrong and the whole machine stops. Now I know you just follow the instructions and it works").

However, dissatisfaction with this subject was voiced most frequently by those women, such as Rhonda, Kay, Angela and Margaret who were hoping to re-enter the workforce. Many of them were counting on the computing subject for marketable skills. Their realisation that an introductory subject such as this could not provide such skills produced an initial disillusionment and disappointment with it. All of the women wanted more time on the terminals, and were angered and frustrated whenever hands-on time was lost because of class re-scheduling or 'down time' on the college system, ("It's a real fizzer at the moment, nothing's happening in it because we can't get on the terminals").

The women's own conceptions of a computing subject were quite specific. They were looking for hands-on training, in a commonly used word processing or data entry software package, in a short vocationally oriented course. Thus they tended to measure the usefulness of Computing in terms of time spent on the keyboard. This subject's mix of basic keyboard skills, introduction to the logic of computer programmes and systems of software and hardware, and analysis of the place and consequences of computers in society was broader than necessary to satisfy their particular needs. Since Computing was the one subject in the course which provided a key to more occupational doors, its lack of intensive and substantial keyboard training and the wider scope of its content proved particularly disappointing. To this extent, the subject failed to meet their immediate vocational needs as they defined them:

> It leads you nowhere because the knowledge you get is not enough...Like, you may say that you have seen a computer and you know how to log on and log off, but that doesn't give you an operator's job or a programmer's job...There isn't enough time to get you into that kind of state.

The Computing teaching facilities and resources at Gilmour College also contributed to some of the problems with the subject. Apart from unavoidable time lost through malfunctions, alterations and re-scheduling in the general college system, time was also lost during Computing classes because of the necessity for individual attention. The Computing teacher, who was very popular with the students because of her patient and careful explanations, and her awareness of their fears about technical knowledge and equipment, often had to move from terminal to terminal to provide individual instruction. Gilmour College does not have teacher-student terminal links which can speed up this process.

The different levels of ability and confidence in understanding and using programme logic, procedures and commands, made it difficult to teach to a common level of progress, which frustrated both the faster and slower students. However, these differing speeds in mastering computer logic and techniques provided faster students with the challenge of working problems out for themselves with the aid of class handouts. It also gave an excellent opportunity for members of the group to teach and learn from each other. However, someone like Kay, who liked "to get going and get into things" and was quick at absorbing practical instruction and information, often found Computing slow:

> I found it slow because she's working with so many of us. Like, when somebody does something wrong you've got to sit there and wait before she can get to you, and in that time you've lost more learning...So I just kept fiddling around with all the keyboard and finally got myself out of the problem...As long as I've got...the handouts...I sort of have an idea of how to get myself out of that situation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, most of the group began reviewing their expectations of the course as the weeks progressed. It became obvious to many of them that eighteen weeks was insufficient time for a course designed for re-entry education to provide those who wanted them with employable skills. This increasing awareness of the limitations of re-entry education courses helped place the training possibilities of Computing into clearer perspective. As the course progressed, and they gained more knowledge about the effects of information technology on production and employment, many of them also realised that experience on the keyboard is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for gaining employment where computers are used. Margaret argued:

> Well I think Computing should have had definitely more time and more continuity...an hour and a half [per lesson] and a week in between [lessons], it should have been longer and possibly more hands-on. When you look back though you don't really need that much hands-on, but you think you do and therefore you feel as though you're not getting anywhere. I'm sure anybody can operate a computer [but] unless you've actually done it you don't have that confidence.

Despite its limitations and frustrations, this subject proved to be a valuable introduction to an unknown, alienating but seemingly occupationally essential body of knowledge, skills and equipment. It also helped many of those who were envisaging word processing and data entry work after the course, to re-consider the implications of working in such

a field. Only Loretta took up further training on computers in a privately run keyboarding course immediately after the four and a half months at Gilmour. She had left full-time office work only a few years before joining the NOW course, and felt that up-grading her typing skills to include word processing was a practicable option for her.

The second most popular subject was Confidence Building, which all the group gave as one of their initial reasons for enrolling. This subject was well liked principally because of its immediate usefulness. Many of the women spoke of applying the techniques and skills in awareness and understanding they learnt in the course in their daily lives. They all liked and felt comfortable with Sue, the Confidence Building teacher, and with the subject matter she was exposing them to. Unlike their experiences in the subject Women, Work and Society, they did not find the focus on personal issues an unexpected or irrelevant aspect of class work. Most of them felt the subject was an important component of the course overall, even though it was not the sole source of their increase in self-esteem ("I think it's a little bit from being out of the house and a little bit from being with all the girls, but mainly from Sue, from the subject"). The subject provided time, space, focus and a supportive environment in which not only to learn useful and relevant self-development skills, but also to explore any issues relating to their lives inside and outside the course. By providing this environment, Confidence Building also contributed significantly to the manner in which fifteen strangers formed into a group of women who began to understand their common experiences and needs, and through this to develop tolerance of their individual differences.

The NOW course assumes that a lack of self-confidence is generally characteristic of its target group. This assumption derives from a feminist analysis of the effects of prolonged periods of suburban, domestic isolation in a socially unrewarded occupation. It would appear that this analysis is correct in relation to the women at Gilmour College. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, many of the women had quite specific and individual sources for their lack of self confidence which either contributed to, or were exacerbated by, the effects of so many years at home. Although by the end of the course many of them felt that they had articulated these problems more clearly to themselves, there seemed to be few activities within Confidence Building designed specifically to isolate these individual problems, and thus assist students to develop solutions appropriate to their own needs. Tanya argued that while exercises designed to develop a positive self-image were useful, for her they represented a somewhat superficial solution to complex and age-old problems:

> It makes me so mad when people say, 'Think positive, don't think negative', because right all the way up, it's been all negative and it's so hard to break that negative...Some people can't seem to understand, it's like they think, 'Oh! You're just thinking that way, that's how come you're that way'. But they don't think that it's from while you were growing up, it's not just from your thinking.

While the skills that Confidence Building teaches are very general in nature, this does not detract from their value. In terms of their individual needs, it is true that by the end of the course Ingrid had learnt to speak up in front of others regardless of her accent, Ranasinghe had entered the workforce for the first time and in a foreign country, and Tanya felt she had come a long way in being assertive about her needs. However, the

success of this subject's ability to promote change and growth according to individual needs, rather than according to a generalised interpretation of the sources of low self-esteem, appears to depend very heavily on the abilities and experience of the subject teacher as a group facilitator and communicator, rather than on activities incorporated into the subject itself. This places a burden on the teacher's skills which could be met by the subject's content and resources.

The criticisms of this subject were that, like Communications, some of its content was unchallenging, repetitious and commonsense. It was often very slow in its development of ideas, and for some of the group the fantasy role plays were not as useful as role plays around problems actually faced by members of the class. However, despite these failings, Confidence Building was an important and necessary component of the course for nearly every woman in the group:

> Wendy — Do you think if the Confidence Building subject was taken out you would still get confidence from being in the course with other people?
>
> Kay — Not as much, because that class has made us aware, it's pointing out everything in detail. If we were just doing a course, right, [with no Confidence Building] we will gain confidence but we won't notice it, you know. Like, [what we do that's not good for our self confidence] is staring us in the eye now, because it's being brought out into the open...We're continually being told that by our friends that we've made [in the course] and it's helping us. [Because] we're identifying with each other, we're able to take these constructive criticisms and work on them.

The subject Women, Work and Society was initially the most disliked, resisted and questioned component of the course. Most of the group who had formed expectations of this subject's content imagined from its title that it would focus on job getting skills and career choices. None expected a feminist analysis of women's position in the workforce and in society generally. Their reactions to its subject matter formed a significant dynamic in the group's response to the course as a whole. (These responses will be considered in greater detail in Section 4.4.) By the end of the eighteen weeks however, it was looked upon by most of the group as the most informative, stimulating, memorable and relevant component of the course.

Of the remaining four subjects, Communications, Mathematics, Science and Technical Drawing, Mathematics was considered a more useful, helpful and necessary component of the course. This is partly because those interested in working with computers after the course believed "it's connected with computing". Many of the group also argued that "it's a part of everyday life you always need".

One of the objectives of this subject is to enable students to overcome "anxiety and phobias" about maths, and to develop self-confidence with mathematical skills. In the same way that the concept 'self-confidence' in Confidence Building seems to be used in a rather generalised way, "anxiety and phobias about mathematics" implies that most women have difficulties with maths. Given the educational streaming of girls in high

schools, and the great under-representation of women in maths and science based occupations, it is reasonable to assume that many women will have had difficulties with maths at some period in their lives. While most of the women in this group were fearful of the Maths component of the course, not all of their anxieties were based on a sense of personal inadequacy, or the belief that maths is inherently frightening and alienating. Some, like Ingrid, Angela and Margaret, experienced great satisfaction in discovering that maths was something they were still "good at". Their fear was that age and lack of practice had placed mathematical skills outside their capabilities, when in their school years they had felt comfortable and confident with them. Ranasinghe was worried that "as a Maths and Science graduate" she would "fail in the eyes of Kathy", the Maths teacher. For her this would be particularly ignominious, as her hard won education and academic abilities were a great source of pride to her. Unlike Ingrid, Angela, Margaret and Ranasinghe, Kay's fears about the Maths classes were a direct outcome of unhappy maths experiences at school ("I used to hate it"). Tanya and Julie's fears were the most complex of all. They knew that no matter how patiently explained and regularly repeated the mathematical logic and formulae would be, they could not keep up, and in a re-entry course such as this, they risked exposure as innumerate adults.

The most successful outcome of the Maths classes was the dissolution of most of the group's fears, anxieties and phobias about maths. The practical examples that were worked on every day in class gave most of them immediate and concrete evidence that maths is not an arcane art that only the young, or men, or those with a special talent are capable of practising. One of the important contributing factors to this success was a sympathetic awareness, evident in the subject's content and in Kathy's teaching approach, of the way in which women's interests and talents in maths are often discouraged:

> I'm sort of getting those negative feelings I had back then [at school] out of my system...I always had this negative attitude, 'I can't do it', and now she's telling me that 'You can do it' and drumming it into you all the time, and I'm finding that I can do things that I wouldn't manage to do...or were out of my reach.

Like Computing, Science and Technical Drawing, Maths also bridged gaps between their lives and those of their husbands and children. What they learnt and practised during the day in all these subjects was a talking point at home at night ("I feel pretty good when I take home a problem that I got out that my son can't do, and he's in high school!"). The only complaint consistently voiced about the content of this subject was a concern that even though it was challenging and satisfying, its content did not appear to be directly relevant to the work place.

The subjects Science and Technical Drawing were considered by all the women to be the least useful of the Technical Strand in this course. For those women like Ranasinghe, Margaret and Kay with previous experience of science at school, this subject was "boring" because it felt like "remedial work, you know, reviewing everything", and did not have any immediate career orientation. It was of greater interest to Sofia, Angela and

others in the group who had not studied any science while at school. Despite this interest, however, this group also "couldn't see [themselves] getting a job out of it". Tanya, Kay and Julie in particular were not interested in Science because it lacked career skills and relevance. This was the only subject in the course in which some of the group occasionally avoided going to class.

Technical Drawing drew very similar responses. A few women simply did not like doing it ("two hours of sitting ruling lines bores me"). Most of the others in the group gradually grew to like it because of its very practical and visual nature, and the satisfaction of developing new skills and creating a finished product each week. Initially they regularly questioned its purpose in the course; at the end many felt quite positive about the time spent with it. However, its relevance to their futures always remained doubtful:

> Well, I feel as if I'm learning something. I'm not very good at it, but I feel as if I'm learning. There're things I never would've thought about...I may not get a career out of it, but at least it's extra things that I know.

The entire group assessed the merits of the course in terms of its relevance not just to their lives in general, but directly to their future plans. This has always been a major concern of the course developers, co-ordinators and teachers. A great deal of effort and attention has been given to designing, resourcing and teaching subject matter which is immediately accessible and pertinent to the students. However, it would seem from the consistent complaint about the applicability of some of the subjects that efforts to develop and conduct a highly relevant and thereby useful course are falling a little short of the mark.

It could perhaps be argued that the concept of 'relevance' used in the course has two meanings, linked to two specific and quite different aspects of the course, which have been conflated into a single meaning used in the course rationale and design. The tensions between the course objectives and the women's needs may be the outcome of the unrecognised differences between these two meanings. The following discussion will explore the distinction between 'relevance to students' lives' and 'relevance to students' needs', and then attempt to show the links between these distinctions and the meaning of 'relevance' which informs the NOW teaching and learning strategies and curriculum objectives.

Course developers and teachers have attempted to make the subject matter and teaching relate to the experiences, needs and daily lives of the students. Wherever possible the content and teaching practices focus on the students' lives, in order to find the starting point of a discussion, and to make connections between what is being taught by the teachers, and what is known and has been experienced by the students. By these means the potential for students' alienation from the course content is reduced.

However, while the content and presentation of the course may be framed and delivered in terms which are relevant to the women's daily *lives*, the outcomes of these development and delivery strategies may not be relevant to their definitions of their *needs*. Many of the women were pleased by the direct connections that were made between the subject matter overall and their own lives and experiences ("...it's based on

everyday experience and the subject relates to you so much easier, doesn't it?"). Many were doubtful, however, that this same easily accessible subject matter was relevant to their future needs ("...but I can't see myself getting a job in it"). As shown earlier in this report, almost two-thirds of the group came to the course for help with re-entry into the workforce. This was clearly their priority. Their constant concern therefore was that, in its curriculum, the course was not always related to their future employment needs, as they defined them:

> I think it is mostly because the aim of the teacher and the aims of the students are quite different. Most of [us] have come here probably thinking that after this course we will have some skills to get into a certain job, which is not the case. It's disappointing because we can't go and say, 'I did the NOW course, I have acquired these skills which are useful in the workplace. Give me a job'. There is no specific skill I have learned during these past four months which I can use in the workplace. Maybe you are a better person, but how will the employer know. I *am* a better person, [from] what I was [to] what I am today.

As discussed in the previous chapter, most of these women have argued that, given their circumstances, their chances of work in traditionally female employment areas are greater and more likely to be realised than their chances in fields outside their experiences and expectations. Hence of all the subjects, Computing, Confidence Building and the careers planning component of Women, Work and Society were considered most beneficial in terms of these employment goals. The least useful subjects, because least relevant in these terms, were Technical Drawing and Science. The relevance of Maths was connected in many students' minds with the obvious marketability of the skills taught in Computing, which was believed to be a maths based form of learning. Yet even Computing, which of the entire course came closest to answering their employment needs, proved disappointing because of its lack of depth:

> Like when you strike it in the office and people are using the computers there, when you get asked you'll say, 'Oh, yes, I've been sitting on them too'. 'Do you know anything about it?' 'Not much'. I mean, it sounds awful. We will never become programmers, what we will be doing out there is operators, yet we don't even know how the thing works.

At the same time, the fact that, in their view these subjects had relatively little bearing on their work aspirations, did not then mean they did not enjoy them, or find them useful and stimulating. The most common response throughout the course to questions about these subjects was, "Oh, it's interesting, but...".

It would seem that the doubts and frustration the group experienced during the course were largely an outcome of the course's limited ability to relate to their need for help with employment, even though much of it did relate to their daily lives. It is suggested here that this distinction between relevance to students' lives, and relevance to students' needs, is a product of the difference between relevance as it relates to teaching and learning and relevance as an issue in course curriculum and objectives.

The distinction between relevance as a model for teaching and learning practices, and relevance within a course objectives and curriculum, appears to have been lost in the course. In its teaching and learning techniques and its presentation, the course refers consistently to appropriate aspects of the women's lives and experiences. In this way the course material is more accessible, because it relates to what is already known. However, in its curriculum objectives, which are the result of decisions about which subjects to include in the course and why, and in particular in its Technical Strand, the course is not always relevant to their vocational needs as they see them. (This is not to imply that the course developers' analysis of women's position in the workforce and the advisibility of women considering non-traditional work areas is incorrect. However, this analysis has included a sociological and historical perspective on these questions which was not always a part of many of the women's approaches to thinking about them.) Sneja's observations about Science encapsulate the difference between relevance in teaching and learning techniques which makes a body of knowledge more accessible to students, and the relevance, or applicability, this knowledge then has to their future plans:

> I like Science, the experiments are very interesting. It's just like cooking, isn't it? We act like we're in a kitchen, we clean up after ourselves, we can't help ourselves...But we don't have to remember these things do we? It's not like we're going to use all these things later on in our jobs. If we forget it, it doesn't matter because we're never going to come across it again, are we?

It is possible to make any subject matter refer in its daily topics, examples, focus, activities, etc. to women's lives and experience, to make it less removed and alienating. This is one of the principal aims of a feminist pedagogy. However it would appear difficult to make relevant the purpose of learning this subject matter if it does not fit in with the learning purposes and needs of the students.

Many of the students also raised doubts about the "seriousness" of the course. The seeming lack of structure, the absence of formal assessment and a sometimes slow pace and unchallenging content lessened the course's educational credibility ("We're just touching the surface and walking off"). The students are accredited with a Statement of Attainment, but the course is not formally articulated with other courses in the TAFE system, and students do not automatically receive credit for NOW course work when enrolling in trade or certificate courses. Thus many students questioned not only the relevance of the course to their future goals, but also the status of the subject matter compared with other courses and other learning experience:

> There's something I don't like about this course. There is no serious involvement like in schooling and going to college, where you have to do this that and the other. There's a lot of discipline there. Here there isn't pressure, so if you want you can learn, or you can leave it and just fill in time and come back home.

Although their future directions were unclear, beyond the understanding that work in traditionally female areas was the most practical option, most women in the group, particularly those intending to work, were quite serious in their desire to learn:

> Mind you, my expectations of coming back to school were, right! we're just going to get straight into it, slog 'til the end of the eighteen weeks. But it didn't happen. We just sat there and sat there and listened. And that just bored me because I'm the sort of person who likes to go and do things.

After a while, the rather undemanding nature of some aspects of the course left quite a few of them with a slightly laissez-faire attitude to working in the course:

> It doesn't matter if I don't get it right. A millimetre here or a millimetre there doesn't matter in this course. If you lose a millimetre it's not serious is it?

One of the NOW course's most important objectives is to broaden students' career options beyond the female work areas. Hence the presence in the syllabus of a Technical Strand of subjects, and an emphasis on technical occupations in the career development component of Women, Work and Society. Despite this focus, at the end of the course many of the women in the group were still considering training and employment in work areas that were familiar to them. Thus it would seem that the course has not been as successful as might be hoped in achieving this particular aim.

There are a number of factors which seem to have influenced these decisions, which militate against the likelihood of the course widening the scope of the women's future options. The women's decisions not to move into technical areas is not a reflection of their degree of interest in subjects such as Science and Technical Drawing, but rather of the fact that these subjects are related to occupational areas outside those of their choosing and their past experience. However, lack of familiarity was not the only reason most of the women still thought at the end of the course that they would not be pursuing work in areas traditionally closed to women. For most of this group, various combinations of the effects of age, economic circumstances, past and present work and educational experiences, and definitions of femininity influenced their perceptions of work in technical fields.

The time and expense involved in training in a non-traditional field were serious impediments to many of the older women. Very few of the group had a substantial maths and science background, which could mean extra study and tuition to allow them entry into maths and science based training in the future. Their previous education had been in humanities, commercial studies and domestic science, which prepared them for short term work in specific occupational areas until they married. Except for Margaret and Ranasinghe, jobs in technical and scientific fields were not part of the self image of these women when young girls. Most of their experiences at home and at work since then has reinforced this. None of them, including Margaret and Ranasinghe, have had any experience of working in technical fields.

Despite reservations about the vocational relevance of the technical subjects, many of the women felt that technical knowledge and skills are important, useful, and interesting. However, it seems that these perceptions of non-traditional skills derive more from an appreciation of their domestic usefulness, than of their implications for employment. Most of the group seemed to be interested in becoming "handy around the house"

through increased technical skills, rather than in becoming a qualified technician or tradesperson. Thus when they agreed with the value of learning technical skills, it may be that they were referring to skills needed at home which traditionally have not been theirs, rather than non-traditional skills which, in the division of labour in the workforce, are outside women's employment fields:

> Wendy There is a direction in the course towards non-traditional work areas. Did this interest you in that kind of work?
>
> Sofia No. Oh, it might, that thing of fixing a lawn mower or something like that, because that's a necessity. But to go into a factory and make cars or something, or into garages and fix them or things like that...I think, that type of job, you really have to be keen on doing it, and at my stage of life, I'm a bit past it.

Like many in the group, Sofia was "brought up in a very old fashioned way" to be feminine. Just as job hierarchies seem to have been based on issues such as status, respectability and sexual purity ("You had to be really, really ignorant to go to the meat factory"), definitions of femininity also played a part in distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate work for women. This is particularly true for the older women of the group. Only Angela and Kay seem to have had any contact while growing up or at work with jobs normally outside women's experience:

> I mean I've never felt like I shouldn't do it. Because like, being at home with brothers and that, we were always fiddling with radios and mucking around. The soldering iron was always out, everybody used it. And changing fuses, my father used to show us all how to change fuses...Even when I was married, Dean used to say, 'Oh, you're the fixer, Angela, you sit down and do it'. So, like, that side of it, I've never felt that I shouldn't do it. I'd have liked to have been a mechanic, motor mechanic.

However, while Angela might be one of the few women in the group open to non-traditional training in the future, her ambitions are focused on computing and office work. One of the ironies of the conflict between the women's plans for immediate re-entry into the workforce, and the course's emphasis on wider options, is that for many of the women work with computers *is* a non-traditional occupation in a technical area. Although they may be using computers in offices, they would be moving outside their previous work experiences into a new and highly technological field.

From their comments during the course, it seems that most of the group's perceptions of non-traditional occupations were dominated by trade work, that is plumbing, carpentry and electrical work. Few seemed to have a wider awareness of the technical training and occupations that are not necessarily associated with trades. Many of the women had either husbands, fathers, brothers or family friends who were tradespeople, and through these relationships were likely to be familiar with the nature of this work and the predominantly masculine culture that goes with it. It could be argued therefore, that

some of their difficulties in considering non-traditional or technical employment options derived firstly from their limited understanding of non-traditional occupations, and secondly from an unwillingness to cross the boundaries of appropriate female behaviour into forms of self expression and work identities which, in their experience, belong to men. The course itself offers very few solutions to this second and profoundly important dilemma (and given the scale and complexity of the issue, it may be unrealistic to expect it to). The term non-traditional is used in a very narrow sense in the course to indicate different work that the women could do. It does not consider in a wider sense who and what the women would become, to themselves and to others, should they step outside the accepted ways in which, through their work, they have grown to see themselves as women. Thus, the course fails to grapple with the very difficult question of how masculinity and femininity are constructed, experienced and expressed through work. Social definitions and personal experiences of masculinity and femininity are part of the mechanisms which historically have divided women's employment options into traditional and non-traditional areas. In the process of determining which areas of the workforce best suited them, these women seemed to be taking into account these definitions, as much as any other consideration.

Definitions of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour within the women's families may also have influenced their occupational goals. Tanya's analysis of the pressures which prevent women from considering technical jobs focused on the expectations men have of the sort of work their wives "should do". In her view it was more likely that the younger, single women would be less influenced by resistance, hostility and pressure from partners who were "threatened" by changes in the women close to them than would the married women:

> They're all married, right? If they turn around and just say they would like to be a mechanic or an electrician or plumber or something, I'm sure their husbands are not going to be happy with that. It'd cause friction. So it's safer. They're not going to have any problems with their husbands if they do work that is traditionally women's jobs, unless their husbands are guys who are not prejudiced.

Certain aspects of the way the women perceived themselves also played a part in these decisions. When asked what they thought their abilities were, Tanya, Rhonda and Sneja said they "didn't know", Angela, Ranasinghe and Loretta felt that "communication" was their greatest ability and the remainder of the group said their talents were organising and supervising housework and children. Of the fifteen women, only Julie mentioned capabilities that were directly connected with occupational skills. She wanted to become a window dresser, because colour and fashion co-ordination was something she felt she had a particular aptitude for. The difficulties these women experienced in recognising and speaking about their individual abilities may have derived from years of practice in focusing on others rather than on themselves. ("You've got so many other things to consider you've got to fit in with the family"). Talking about personal strengths and talents is not part of appropriate female behaviour, and self-deprecation is one of the socialised habits of women:

> I don't like writing down or talking about my personal things. I don't like bragging about myself. I find it very hard to say anything about myself that might be good. I don't know what my abilities are because I can't find it inside to talk about myself like that.

The vocational abilities that have been developed in them in the past were generally those connected with stereotypically female professions. Whether working in the workforce or at home it would also seem that most of their previous experiences have not encouraged confidence and security in their individual identities as workers ("After ten years in that job I thought, what was I, what did I do then?"). Insecurities about their abilities as workers were reinforced by their lack of qualifications ("...I want *the qualifications*, because without that you're nothing, they look at you like you're nothing"). Thus during the course many of the women found the process of exploring their strengths, ambitions and options to be a difficult, stressful and uncomfortable experience. When this exploration moved into non-traditional areas it also became very threatening. The anxiety many of them experienced in trying to decide on their future directions was worsened by the information that some of the areas they had chosen to work in were closing down. Although many of them agreed that women's work areas are vulnerable to restructuring and job shrinkage, their inability to think of themselves outside these areas made it extremely difficult to do anything with this knowledge other than feel anxious ("Why do they keep saying these jobs are going to go? What am I supposed to do?"). This anxiety then made it difficult for them to participate in the process of exploration:

> Wendy [Remember when] Lesley was trying to get everyone to think about what they were going to do next. Was that a strange experience...given the past when no-body asked you to do it before?
>
> Angela Oh yes...sometimes I hated it. I felt like I've got to come up with something quick you know...Like, I'll just do it just for keeping her happy, you know what I mean, like it wasn't for me...See, I can realise now what she was on about, but in the beginning we just expected to do a course in computing and those sorts of things...I think it was about three-quarters of the way through I started to think about what she was going on about in Career Development.

The objectives of the NOW course are to provide its students with the skills and information that will help them make more informed choices in the future. The course offers guidance into areas of training and employment outside their experience, where they may have greater chances of new and rewarding occupations. It also promotes greater self-esteem and self-awareness through confidence building skills. In terms of its curriculum, as this discussion has shown, in many respects the course has achieved these aims. All of the group reported an increase in their levels of self confidence and their capacity to appreciate and assert their personal worth. All of them felt that both the technical and non-technical subjects had broadened their horizons, demystified certain disciplines, and

allowed them to begin developing new and useful skills. However, from the women's point of view this success in achieving course objectives is a partial one. When measured against their future vocational goals, most of the group found the technical subjects in the curriculum informative and useful, but ultimately largely irrelevant. The criteria used in making these measurements were drawn from their past or present circumstances, and their understanding of the personal implications of any change in direction.

Based on an analysis of the social processes which render women economically and personally less secure than men, NOW course developers have made decisions about course content which they would argue, with substantial evidence, are in the students' best interests. While the women have agreed that the facts of women's position do indicate which avenues offer greater security in the future, they in their turn have argued that some of these avenues may lead to circumstances which are not in their best interests, and given their present responsibilities, not very practicable. Entry into the technical areas of employment requires long term planning and some expense. Most of the career planning of the women was focused on short term goals which could satisfy their immediate economic needs. While they may change their career directions in the long term, many of them have asked how has the course benefitted their immediate vocational needs.

4.3 Teaching and Learning:

"See, they're teaching us as adults...knowing that we've been in the house for so many years"

The teaching methods of the NOW course are based on the needs of mature age women re-entering education after many years' absence from formal classroom learning. Mature age women's learning needs are believed to depend upon a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment in which co-operative group dynamics are encouraged, alienating aspects of formal education are demystified, personal experience is recognised and validated and women's common experiences explored. Evaluation, guidance and counselling provided during the course facilitate personal change and decision making. It is argued by course developers that this informal and supportive approach to learning will make the content of the course easily accessible and build students' confidence and morale. It is also felt that this approach allows greater flexibility in classroom dynamics. In these ways both the curriculum and the teaching method of the course are designed to be responsive to students' needs.

In order to create such a learning environment, course teachers are encouraged to use a wide and varied range of teaching approaches. These include modified lectures, directed discussions, practical sessions in the form of workshops and experiments, whole and small group activities and individual projects, role plays and simulation games, talks from guest speakers, and visits to other areas of the college and to the community. Teachers are advised to use a variety of teaching resources, such as class handouts, worksheets, popular print media, audio-visual media and equipment appropriate for hands-on learning in workshops and experimental sessions. These techniques and resources and the educational philosophy behind them were used in the NOW course at Gilmour College.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the value of this approach to teaching and learning in the NOW course, and to determine what part it plays in successfully achieving the course objectives. This discussion will focus on three important aspects of this issue: the students' responses to the teaching and learning techniques used in the course, the significance of the process of group formation for effective learning, and the effects of the nature of the relationships established between teachers and students. The chapter will conclude with a discussion on what can be learnt about the elements of mature age, socio-economically disadvantaged women's learning in light of these findings.

Methods of Teaching and Learning

The teaching methods used in the course varied according to the nature of the subjects, the physical layout of the classrooms, and the types of activities involved in class work. These variations influenced the 'feel' of each of the subjects, which seemed to divide in some of the students' minds into subjects which taught facts, which were the technical options, and those in the core group of subjects which seemed to focus more on ideas and self development:

> Well, one is more for your thoughts, isn't it? It's waking you, stirring you up in other words. The other one is the traditional areas that you have to have.

The subjects Ingrid called "traditional" (i.e. subject such as Maths and Science) appeared to many in the group to have greater educational legitimacy. These subjects seemed to teach facts and skills, rather than the development of ideas and self perceptions, and thus as a classroom experience were closer to their memories of high school learning experiences than were the more personal awareness subjects such as Confidence Building. Most of the group were expecting to learn facts and skills related to work. Very few were prepared for information and discussions which might challenge them to change their ideas. Most of the group also anticipated a more 'chalk and talk' style of teaching ("It's not like school is it? They teach us differently"), and initially found the amount of class participation strange and a little daunting. None of them expected to find their own experiences used as a starting point for discussion in subjects such as Confidence Building and Women, Work and Society, nor to have women's lives generally taken as the principal reference point by nearly all the teachers. Thus, for some time many of them felt that they were "really learning something" in subjects such as Science and Maths, but that those mentioned above seemed to be about "re-arranging my head". The flexibility in the subject matter in these latter subjects also provoked a mixed response:

> ...it would've been hard if the teacher had to stick to a set syllabus and finish each portion with an exam. To that effect this is the plus point of this course, although it is the minus point of the course also because sometimes it drags on and on and people get out of focus when the irrelevant talk comes. It gets boring.

The techniques used most often in all subjects except Technical Drawing, which by its nature is based on individual work, were small group class work, class discussions and individual activities. At regular intervals during the two hours of each subject, students would break into small groups for particular activities, or were encouraged to participate in class discussion of an issue, or worked individually. The physical movement involved in these changing modes of work helped maintain an informal classroom atmosphere, and provided students with a break from sitting still and from prolonged demands on their attention. Whenever possible the seating was circular rather than in rows.

All of the women in the group responded positively to these particular methods of teaching and felt that a number of benefits followed from them:

> Ranasinghe Yes, it is very good working in groups. It throws up all kinds of ideas you would never have thought of and ultimately the teacher throws in some questions...so everything comes up. It makes you more involved all the time so you can't waiver from the subject, it keeps you in focus.
>
> Sneja Well, after being out of school for so many years at first you say, 'Oh why must I change? Why can't we just sit around in the same way?' But you get in close contact with other people and then you share their ideas much more closely than if we were sitting at a distance like we

were before. I think you learn a little bit more. Like today, we did those exercises, and I had Ranasinghe's opinion and May's opinion, and then it makes you think. If you went on your own then you would only think in one line.

Angela Because you can't have everybody shouting across the room all the time, you know, to get other people's ideas. So, if everybody's got the same idea at the one time we all want to get it out and you can't do that. Whereas if you've broken up into three or four groups you've got enough time to get it out. Everyone's got an ear, you know. We all get our chance to say, 'Well, what did you think, what's your idea of it?', whereas if it's in the classroom you can't go round saying, 'What did you think of it?'.

Small group work and class discussions promoted greater participation amongst the group and in so doing encouraged students to voice ideas, explore a variety of opinions, and most importantly to teach and learn from each other in the process. Their thinking was challenged while they were learning to debate and defend their opinions ("When you're used to not thinking very much, you don't lift yourself up to something higher or outside your little environment"). Small group work seemed to play an important part in the process of group formation, as students got to know each other while working on activities. It gave teachers the opportunity to introduce students to each other by changing the seating arrangements. It also helped prevent a competitive hierarchy of 'bright' and 'dumb' students from becoming institutionalised in the class, by having students speak collectively from their groups, rather than always individually. An important outcome of shared activities appeared to be the practice it gave students in communicating with others outside their private circles of family and friends. Angela argued that this was a way of preparing for meeting with people out in the workplace which can be quite intimidating for women who have been at home for many years:

> Like, we're all strangers but we find that we do have things in common whereas when you're at home all the time you don't. It's a retraining, because we had it before when we were working and then you leave work and you stay at home you kind of lose it. You lose a bit of confidence and you think, oh I'll never be able to go out again and do it. This just shows you that you can. I mean I just don't look at myself as a student, I often think, well this is what it's going to be like at work if you go.

It also seemed to give them a much needed opportunity to gain a sense of their own abilities, through assessing them in relation to other people's.

Small group work also proved to have one or two disadvantages. Some felt that discussions were sometimes unproductive because they were not sufficiently guided ("You need a leader or you wander off the topic"), and slowed down the pace of class work. Small group work also posed particular problems for Tanya. Her shyness in approaching people generally ("You couldn't say 'boo' to me, I was so shy!"), unhappy relationships with one or two in the class, and apprehension about her ability to learn made it hard for her to approach others when required to form a group:

> I didn't like the groups. I found that everyone quickly formed their groups and I found myself wondering which group to go to, so I had to go to a group that wasn't full, and it was always the ones I didn't like. I'm funny, I don't like to go towards anyone unless I'm sort of invited so I stand back and wait and if they don't invite me I won't come. *y*ou know. It's dumb, but I do that.

Tanya preferred to work alone, which allowed her to progress at her own pace ("I take so long to learn") and gave her the privacy to work out problems in her own way without risking judgment from others. Thus she found subjects such as Technical Drawing less stressful than those where small group interaction was more common.

Like small group work, class discussions also promoted participation and exposed the group to a variety of ideas. Discussions such as these demonstrated to the students that they could determine the direction and content of debate ("We asked the teachers, 'Why do you allow this to go on?', and they said, 'Well it's up to you to stop it'"), and developed their communication skills through debating with each other. During these discussions, the group questioned teachers on their opinions and experiences, which helped form student-teacher relationships of greater equality. However, in subjects such as Confidence Building and Women, Work and Society, where class discussion is most commonly used, a number of students initially were doubtful about the legitimacy of this form of learning. To many of them it seemed more like "just a bunch of bored housewives talking all the time". Most seemed unfamiliar with methods of organising informal group interaction as their early response to a question was to talk all at once. As a group they had to learn to focus on the topic under discussion and to take turns in speaking. With practice, class discussions took the form of debates rather than conversations. During this process, it seemed that the women were also becoming aware that these kinds of discussions provide a form of analysis of social and personal issues which is also a way of learning and problem-solving ("It throws up all kinds of ideas you would never have thought of").

Through these discussions many of them also began to understand that classroom environments and teaching and learning exchanges are not very different from learning and communication in the outside world. This significantly reduced the alienation many of them felt from the classroom, and education in general brought on by long absence and unfamiliarity. The high levels of interaction and participation in class also made the women aware that "we are here to learn from each other", which gave them confidence in their own expertise and judgments, and challenged traditional definitions of teachers as experts and students as the uninformed.

One of the key elements in the process of "learn[ing] from each other" was provided by role plays. These proved to be an important mechanism for bridging the gap between the women's familiar roles and identities as housewives, and the new and untried ones of adult students. Role plays which were based on problems some of the group were currently facing drew on skills, knowledge and expertise the women had already developed in their adults lives, outside the formal education system. As the issues were all ones they had either experienced themselves or could identify with, and were also common to most women, they could act as experts, offering solutions that were useful and constructive and backed up by experience. Role plays gave those like Tanya and Julie, who felt less confident in their ability to participate in the technical subjects, an opportunity to "contribute something". As a teaching method, they took the focus off teachers as the qualified sources of knowledge, and placed members of the group in front of the class instead. Furthermore, they provided an opportunity for sharing experiences in a more dynamic and revealing manner than a simple narration, helped students enter the limelight without directly facing the class alone, and showed those who participated in them that they could think on their feet. Role plays also proved to be a very good means of encouraging students to identify with each other as women, through collective problem-solving that did not simply involve facts and formulae, which then contributed to the greater intimacy of the group. Role plays also had the capacity to be both funny and moving, and if successful gave a memorable demonstration of theory in practice. For women like Ingrid they offered a non-threatening way into class participation:

> In the beginning I never said anything, I was just waiting for someone else to do it...Trying to give advice to people [during a role play], that's how it started with me, not asking questions but sort of giving advice here and there.

The use of a participatory style of teaching and learning through small group and class discussions and role plays, seemed to suit adult students accustomed to the interaction of conversation in daily communication. Many of them found it very difficult to concentrate when time was spent passively listening to teachers. Whenever this happened:

> ...the only way I could cope with it was to keep stopping and asking questions. I had to keep making up these questions to keep me awake, I would've fallen asleep in class. I thought, this is happening because you're just listening to a voice. I mean I was dying to hear what was said, but I couldn't keep my eyes open. When we were doing things we were all awake because we were actually moving and getting involved.

The difficulties some experienced in paying attention when there was little teacher-student interaction were compounded by environmental factors such as outside noise or a hot atmosphere, uncomfortable seats or classes arranged in rows, and the timetabling of some of the less interesting subjects in the afternoons when energy was low.

Workshops and practical sessions proved the most satisfying of all teaching methods. Most of the group commented regularly on their desire for more hands-on learning. None of the women felt they needed text books, as the regular class handouts more than adequately provided them with information. Almost all said they would not be able to afford them, even if they were central to the course. Very few had the time or energy for extensive reading, and many of them found it hard to keep up with their notes:

> So when I go to bed sometimes I take these papers, and I think I'll look through them, but that's where they end, near the bed. I don't even get to open them, I feel so exhausted. And I feel terrible about it.

Ranasinghe felt that there were educational reasons for not using set text books:

> No, in a limited class like this that is the best. Because the levels of education and study [in the past] and the levels that you are in at present are all very different. Although I did all that kind of stuff fifteen, seventeen, years ago, I can't do it now. Because I don't know what to look for basically.

It seemed from some of the women's comments that the course did not provide a sufficient variety of levels of difficulty in class activities and exercises. This sometimes left students like Kay, Ranasinghe and Rhonda "bored" and dissatisfied ("I just end up fiddling around"). However, while this lack of variation in the course fails to recognise differing levels of ability, many of the students at Gilmour felt that these differences formed an important part of class dynamics:

> ...the ones who know where they are and what they're doing and what the teacher is talking about are the ones who want to keep rushing ahead, and the ones who can't understand are wondering what she is talking about.

The most notably absent teaching method was an appropriately developed set of assessment procedures, designed to measure students' progress towards achieving the course objectives. All of the women attached great importance to any form of feedback from the teachers. In the many years that have passed since leaving school, they have lost contact with themselves as students in formal education. Julie described herself as "lost", a comment which encapsulated much of the women's sense of their relationship with learning. Increasingly over the years their achievements at school have become less relevant in the labour market. "Everybody today has got H.S.C.", while most of the group finished formal education with the School Certificate.

It would seem that assessment procedures which rank students by measuring their abilities against those of others would be inappropriate and counter-productive in a course such as this ("...because there is a person who hasn't really seen the face of school, and here I am who has seen college"). Suitably designed methods of assessment and feedback could provide these students with a much needed awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses, without placing them in a line from best to worst student. Regular

feedback on submitted individual work would provide each person with evidence of the ability to go on with further education, and allow them to get their bearings in relation to the processes of learning in the classroom, and their place in the education system generally ("I need to know where I'm up to. I need to know that I can do it"). Assessment of their work would help with absorption and retention of course content, and prepare them for tests, exams and graded written work in later courses. Regular monitoring of their individual progress would also reassure them that the teachers know what their individual abilities and needs are. Sofia and Ingrid gained confidence in themselves and their teacher from the non-threatening assessment procedures used in one of the subjects in a TAFE course they enrolled in after finishing NOW:

> She makes sure you understand. She gives us lots of class tests. You don't even notice that this is a test, but she knows where you stand. In the beginning Sofia said, 'How is that related to what we've just been doing?', and I says, 'I think she's trying to see what makes us tick'. She gave you a little twist and that way she knew that we understood or not understood it. Also it makes it stick in your mind.

With this knowledge teachers could then more accurately pinpoint students' strengths and improve their weaknesses. While reassurance and support from teachers that "you can do it" is important, it is insufficient without any concrete and demonstrable evidence that this is so.

One of the arguments behind the flexibility and thereby responsiveness which is designed into the NOW course, is that it allows students to pace themselves according to their individual needs and goals. The practice of self-pacing is a very difficult one to develop for women who have had little experience in their adult lives of the discipline and self-awareness required in academic work. The specifics of how to pace themselves, and to what end, are almost impossible to devise on their own, when all many of them can say about their educational needs are "I need a few more skills". Without the guidance that regular assessment and feedback provides, self-pacing can readily become a confused circling rather than a progressive accumulation of knowledge:

> ...like, they knew what they'd done but it really didn't mean anything to them unless someone else sort of told them that they did well or something, you know, some sort of feedback.

Forming a Group

The teaching methods of the NOW course are designed to facilitate the development of a supportive and non-threatening learning environment in the classroom. An important element in the establishment of this environment is the process through which a group of strangers find that they "do have things in common", and on that basis as a group can provide mutual support for each other's needs. It is believed that this process will have two important outcomes for the women's experience of the course which are closely

connected with the course objectives. The first is that a co-operative learning environment will help overcome the self-doubt, anxiety and alienation that mature age women might experience when first re-entering education. The second is that in sharing their experiences, the group will become aware of the common factors influencing their position as women in society, and with this awareness become better equipped to make decisions regarding their futures.

The process of group formation is extremely complex and difficult, particularly with the variety of personal histories and beliefs that fifteen individuals may have. Although, as we have seen in the earlier chapters on their lives, the group of women at Gilmour College had shared very similar experiences in terms of their levels of education, the subjects they had studied at school, their employment histories, their family lives as wives and mothers, and the effects of prolonged absence from work and education, in other respects their lives were very different. These differences formed the basis of the problems they experienced in the process of forming into a group of women united by the bonds of shared experiences.

Four issues in particular seemed to form the major points of conflict within the group. They were racism, levels of education, marriage, and personal styles of communication. The conflicts around these issues made it difficult for the women to recognise their common experiences as women, and inhibited the processes of learning.

During discussions in class it became obvious that some of the Anglo-Saxon Australian born women were hostile towards migrant Australians, because of their belief that migrants are an unwelcome intrusion into the local labour market and "Australian way of life", and are better served than non-migrants by the government of the day. Ingrid's previous experiences of racist antagonism in the workforce made her acutely aware of this resentment. Following the pattern of her responses to this in the past, she withdrew from participation in class:

> It's because of our bad English you know. She doesn't like all of us with our bad English. She picked on one of us soon after we started and I knew that that was what was wrong. I don't want to work with her because I know...she thinks there's so many migrants here in the course and it's not fair. I don't talk so much in class because I know she's listening to my English.

Most of the women from overseas felt uncomfortable with the hostility towards migrant Australians expressed by Rhonda and one or two others in the group. There was also an awareness amongst some of these women that being born in an English speaking foreign country made them more acceptable as migrants than others in the group. This corroborated Ingrid's belief that her accent would draw this sort of hostility towards her and others like her. Angela felt that:

> I think with the English speaking like myself, I feel as if I'm considered one of them, somebody who's lived here. I feel that, not just in the group but around just in life. They often talk about migrants and, 'Don't bloody speak English', and 'Why should they

> get all this and all that', gets the pension and the dole you know. And I say, 'Well I get the pension and I'm a blow-in too'. 'Oh, but you're different, you can speak...', you know. I think it's the same thing in the course.

Ranasinghe was the most educated woman in the group. Her university degree was extremely important to her ("...really proud that I stood first in the class and got awards") especially given her struggles to achieve it. It also seemed at this point in her life to be helping her keep her sense of self intact, in the face of indifference or hostility in a predominately Anglo-Saxon society. As a very recent migrant, she seemed to be suffering from the profound loneliness and loss of self identity that often follows such a dramatic life change ("...in the course seeing that there are other women also like you and that they're not really above you because they are here first"). The need for companionship, recognition, and practice in communication skills appropriate for a new social environment had brought her to the course. However, her forthright and articulate manner, her greater, more educated command of English, and her frequent references to her degree produced resentment in many of the other women. During discussions about personal backgrounds, this was compounded by her description of her life as an upper-class woman in another country. She often criticized the course for being elementary, which given her education it was. For the rest of the group these comments simply heightened their awareness of their own lack of education, and made it difficult for them to defend their need of a course which she described as basic and uninteresting:

> She used to say all the time the course was boring for her and a waste of time, and asked me what I was getting out of it. I used to think she obviously doesn't need this course, and I do so much, and that made me feel stupid. And she always talked about how educated she was! It was hard to talk because she talked so much in class.

Discussions during class also revealed conflicts in attitudes towards women of different marital status. Some of the married women expressed concern about marital breakdown, the quality of care given to children in single parent families and occasionally implied that single mothers were less respectable because unmarried. A couple of the younger single mothers were reluctant to have their single parent status known in the group:

> I haven't told the women that I have never been married. I let them think that I was separated. They just automatically assumed that. Because they gave me the impression that they'd think, oh that awful...you bad person, sort of thing, so I didn't want to get into that with them. You see with the divorced ones, the married ones think, oh they're divorced, a breakdown in their communications, that's acceptable. You being in a de facto isn't.

There was also an important economic dimension to these differences. Some of the married women who were struggling to make ends meet on a low income in a single income family resented what they felt was discriminatory government support for women who "chose to be unmarried mothers". It made them angry when they discovered that

because of their husbands' incomes, unlike the single mothers they could not get TEAS. While this hostility affected her relationships with the married women who felt this way, Angela also understood their feelings:

> I felt a bit strange when I got my TEAS. Like I'm getting a pension and now I'm getting a free education and TEAS. Rhonda came to mind and I thought, she's a bit resentful about it because she's married and she's struggling, she has done everything right and here we come in and we get everything...But I had a home and all those things and lost it, and it wasn't my fault. See, unless you've gone through it, you don't understand. If you've just been mixing with married people you're never going to understand how it feels to be a burden on your family.

The final and in some ways most important, because on-going, source of conflict in the group arose out of differences in personal styles of behaviour and communication. Throughout the course, a number of the women, such as Rhonda, Sneja, Ranasinghe, Angela, Ingrid and Julie, spoke up consistently in class discussions, whereas Tanya, Margaret, Loretta and May participated less frequently.

Two of these more dominant personalities in the group were a source of some resentment and unhappiness amongst many in the rest of the group. Rhonda was extremely quick-witted, with a droll, often sardonic and very direct sense of humour. She was very articulate, and spoke in a strong voice with seeming great confidence. Her body language was as expressive as her way of speaking and it was easy to sense her moods. However, while regularly the source of great hilarity, her quick and pithy comments were often full of a cynicism and negativity which undercut the some of the others'enthusiasm and willingness to participate. Her pessimistic belief that "if there's a cream cake around, I'm not the one who's going to get it" seemed to stem from the series of almost overwhelming tragedies that had dominated the early years of her marriage. In her teens, "life was a ball", but after the events that followed it became something "that kicks you in the head" ("I got married, I had four pregnancies and three children and a few deaths. It's all in those six years. I don't think about what happened before or what happened after"). Her regularly expressed conviction that the course would prove to be yet another disappointment affected many of the other women:

> She's so sour and so negative about everything. It's not good for the course. She wants to knock people all the time, the course and the teachers. She doesn't give anybody a chance. It's just not nice being with her.

Rhonda's comments about migrants and unmarried mothers affected women like Tanya, one of the three younger Maori women. Tanya was also reluctant to work with Rhonda in small group activities because of her seeming unsympathetic attitude towards those who were not as quick at learning as she was:

> Picky, very picky. She doesn't want to mingle with anybody she feels can give her nothing. In other words, in this case, brain, you know. And I had really nothing that she could make use of. She couldn't get any answers from me because I was struggling. So therefore she didn't want me there to work with. She has a way of making you feel unimportant, very sarcastic. She just brought on all my negative feelings right back again. She just bombed it out for me.

Ranasinghe's style of communication was appropriate to upperclass society in urban India. She had not been in Australia long enough to have become accustomed to the subtleties of social interaction practised here. At first her forthright and self-assured manner often made her genuine and sympathetic interest in the other women's lives overbearingly intrusive. Although her English was fluent, she had trouble "understanding your different accents". Before entering the course she had made very little close contact with anyone outside her family, particularly with women who were born here. Her need for this kind of contact, which might help lessen her acute awareness of her difference, made her speak about her background to an extent that was almost insistent. Angela astutely pointed out that this difference in class background was a sore point with the rest of the group, and in reality the source of their dislike:

> I don't think it's just because she's Indian. If she was one of the poor ones she would be very accepted. She's just trying to understand a lot of things and she asks a lot of questions.

Thus the possible reasons behind her tendency to dominate class discussions were not understood by the rest of the group. Ranasinghe was aware of these dynamics herself:

> I felt some of the women [were] deliberately keeping away from me. They always used to say, 'Oh, why are you here, you are a graduate, you don't need this course'. They didn't know what kind of problems I was facing. Communicating with people was alright, but I didn't have the confidence to go over and speak to people because I didn't know how they'll react. Like for example, in class the other day it went wrong when I spoke with Ingrid but I really didn't mean it that way. That's what happens, you know, when the customs are different. You say something in a certain sense and somehow it gets misinterpreted.

The conflicts and tensions which developed in the group over personal behaviour and attitudes to certain issues were the stumbling blocks to the formation of group solidarity and a co-operative mode of interaction. The nett effect of these differences was a fear amongst many of the women that their needs would not be supported by the rest of the group. A lack of trust in each other and thus the group as a whole grew out of these fears:

> It's because it's taken so long for us to trust each other, and that's because of one or two people in the group. You can't talk about yourself and what you want if someone else is going to knock you because they don't need what you need, or they don't think the course is any good.

Although only a few individual friendships were formed during the course at Gilmour College strong bonds of understanding, acceptance and support were eventually established. In developing these bonds, the women came to see themselves as members of a group which had come to have great significance in their lives. An important part of the process of group formation seemed to have been the identification of common goals. In understanding the struggles which they were all facing if they wished to achieve these goals, they began to feel more affinity with each other's needs and aspirations than with those of women outside the course. Rhonda's increasing awareness not only of her own goals but also of the changes that would improve women's options generally began to run counter to the ideas of some of her old friends:

> I went to tennis the other day and I was talking about how we ought to be encouraging our daughters to do maths and science and things. See what the course does to you! And then I said I wanted to get a job, I didn't want to stay home any more. And they said, 'Oh you know what the solution to that is. You should have another baby'. 'Have another baby! You must be joking', I said. 'I haven't got time to sit around rose bushes drinking tea and watching tennis balls go by. I want to do something!'

Eventually the nature of their interactions as a group began to contrast with those in some of the relationships they had outside the course:

> It's a particular feeling, you know...It's hard to explain. We all feel so much closer to each other, and I feel like I can talk here and be listened to. People ask me what the course is like and what I do, and I can't think how to tell them how it feels, so I just say we do maths and science. And one of my friends, I can't talk to her now. I'm happier inside but I don't open up with her anymore because she's still stuck there, and I don't want to disturb her.

The most important dynamic in the process through which the women developed greater trust and tolerance, was a steadily increasing understanding of the motives behind their individual behaviours and attitudes. From talking about the events in their lives they learnt of their personal struggles and problems, and through this altered some of their perceptions of each other. Thus a number of the women reassessed their reactions to the troublesome personal styles of Rhonda and Ranasinghe. After learning more about her life, Ingrid expressed immediate sympathy with Rhonda's entrenched pessimism, and acknowledged her great courage:

> I can understand why she is the way she is. It's the worst thing for a mother to lose her child. It must have been very hard for her to keep going.

Angela's observant and sympathetic assessments of the dynamics around her prompted her to try to change some of Rhonda's views. Following her belief that life experiences change ideas and attitudes, she began taking the few opportunities available to talk with Rhonda about her own life:

> Like, I explain things to her, I do a lot of that for her, and she mightn't realise what I'm doing. I tell her so much about my life so that she doesn't have that attitude about TEAS you know and about Kay and us who aren't married. I go to get the train in the morning with her and I'm walking down the road with her so I have a little bit more time really...I kind of explain to her what it's like to be uprooted, and if she had to live on the pension, if say, like nobody knows from one day to the next [if your husband's going to still be there] and she's on her own, you know.

It also became apparent that Rhonda's attitudes to migrants were more than just manifestations of racism. Her perception of how much harder it would be to find work without fluent English reinforced her sense of failure in not finding a job herself:

> I felt bad because I'm the only Australian left here, well except for you Margaret, and I haven't got a job. And I don't have any excuse because I don't have any problems with English. It's made me feel a failure. Why can't *I* get a job?

Through talking about their lives, many of the women began to realise that while Ranasinghe's life materially may have been easier and more secure than theirs, her fight for some form of education was similar to the one they faced. Through spending time with her in class they began to accept that "that's the way she is" in conversation, and appreciate her strength, her friendliness and her particular needs of the course:

> I felt a bit funny towards Ranasinghe, she's very abrupt, sort of slammed it at you and I used to think, you've got a cheek! But then I thought, no, she's got gumption, and you've got to have that. Also it was sad for her because she was bored stiff with most of the subjects. She used to go to sleep in science. But she needed the course as much as we did, you know.

Although the women at Gilmour College eventually resolved many of the conflicts amongst them, some of the original tensions remained. Many members of the group still expressed reservations about each other both during the course and after its completion. Although it was Julie who said "I can talk here and be listened to", both she and Tanya did not feel sufficiently confident in the sympathy, awareness and tolerance of the rest of the group to talk honestly about their educational needs. From their point of view competitive learning still operated in the classroom ("...they don't want to share"), which, if

the truth were ever known about their levels of education, would automatically place them at the bottom of the class. To retain some control over the situation, and prevent their exposure, they employed their well-practised strategies of "bluff" and camouflage. However, while effective, the after-effects of these strategies were anger, distress, tension from the continuing pretence, alienation from the group and a heartbreaking lack of progress:

> I fooled my way through, like I do a lot of things. When we had to write down things in class I'd sit there, you know, and watch the others. They were so good at it. I'd see Sneja sitting there and Ranasinghe sitting there and 'course they'd write it all down. Then Lesley would say, 'O.K., have you finished!', and I'd say, 'Yeah, I've finished', even though, you know, I didn't write a thing. I had it all in my head, right, like I'd get everything ready in my head so if she's asked me I could say it. Then I'd hope like mad she wouldn't come and look at it. And then other times when I tried, you know, writing it, I'd get so angry, so *mad*, I just wanted to tear up the paper and walk out, you know, outside somewhere and cry. Nobody knew how bad it was!

Illiteracy and innumeracy are more widespread in the community than is the understanding that would help those who suffer because of it. Thus no-one in the group fully grasped the reality of the problems Julie and Tanya were having, even when they attempted to talk about it:

> I tried to say how I felt in the class even though I was ashamed, you know, of like how little I knew. See. I'd drop hints, I'd say to the others, 'Oh, but you don't know how bad it is, how much I have to catch up', and they'd laugh like it was a joke you know. They'd say, 'Oh no Julie, you just need a dictionary, you just need practice in your spelling. You talk so good, you just need a little bit to catch up'. So I fooled them even though I tried to tell them. I got so upset, like, watching them writing in class, no problems, you know. It was so easy for them. Yeah, but they were lovely women still.

Tanya felt that revealing the limited nature of her past education would continually place her in the spotlight during class activities, something she dreaded as much as ridicule. She also feared that the rest of the group would be held back by her slower pace. Fear of these consequences made her cautious about saying too much:

> It's just so hard for me because I can't comprehend things and I take so long to learn. People are getting impatient with me while I'm trying to comprehend and it's got to be repeated almost like it's got to be stamped in my brain before I comprehend it. That's how I feel. When people take notice of me it makes me feel even worse. I just wish they'd go about their own business while I'm asking the teacher or while I'm trying to figure what's what and all that.

Two lessons can be learnt from this account of the dynamics of the group's relationships at Gilmour College. These women's experiences demonstrate the important educational significance of cohesive group formation among students in the classroom. It would seem that the development of interpersonal relationships and group membership based on support, concern, tolerance and understanding forms the basis of a co-operative learning environment. Within this environment a highly effective participatory style of learning is possible, which encourages both the absorption of knowledge, and personal growth and development - the two broad aims of the NOW course. A competitive and thereby possibly divisive approach to acquiring knowledge, in most of these women's minds would inhibit learning:

> If you don't ask, you won't learn. And it's hard to ask if someone's making you feel stupid. They're stopping you from learning.

A co-operative learning environment is difficult to achieve particularly when the majority of a student group's past learning experiences has been based on competition. In the case of a group such as this it would seem that this kind of environment depends on extensive student involvement, measurements of successful learning which are individually rather than group referenced, the understanding that students can be teachers as well as learners through shared expertise and experiences, and as argued above, the formation of group solidarity. Of all these elements, the achievement of group solidarity appears to be the most volatile, arduous and demanding process.

The second lesson that can be drawn from the preceding discussions is rather more conjectural than conclusive. Considerable emphasis is placed within NOW courses on successful group formation, and from this evidence it would appear rightly so. It would seem, however, that like terms such as 'self-confidence' and 'non-traditional', the notion of 'group formation' has a number of dimensions. The purpose of cohesive group formation is to contribute to a co-operative and therefore non-threatening classroom environment, in which students can learn, and to facilitate personal support amongst students, which is an aid to learning. However, while students may be encouraged to co-operate with each other in the common goal of acquiring knowledge and skills, they may not necessarily provide each other with personal support. As the interpersonal conflicts in the course at Gilmour College showed, for some amongst the group there were insufficient grounds for establishing mutually supportive relationships, when individual differences were too great.

It could be argued therefore that there appear to be two dimensions within the process of group formation. One involves the development of *student unity*, in which all members of the group recognise their common interests as students, and work co-operatively to realise them. The other is based on *personal unity*, in which for reasons of their own, individual friendships are formed amongst smaller groups of students which provide the kind of emotional support and intimacy which can often extend beyond the life of the course. The strategies which teachers and co-ordinators devise to facilitate the process of group formation may be more effective if they take into account the differing purposes and workings of these two dimensions.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The teaching and learning strategies outlined in the NOW course syllabus emphasise the need to recognise "the particular learning styles with which mature age women are comfortable" (NOW Syllabus, p.6). Teachers are advised to encourage the development of a "comfortable, secure" classroom environment which is supportive of these styles of learning. NOW course teachers are generally recruited on the basis of their subject expertise, their previous experience in teaching women, and/or a demonstrated awareness of the educational needs of mature age women and the teaching styles that would best suit them. Teachers and co-ordinators in the course pay particular attention to developing a close personal and working relationship with students in their classes, which, as this discussion will show, does contribute to the comfort and security of the classroom environment.

The educational argument implied in the teaching styles characteristic of the NOW course is that a teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect and consideration, and an awareness of students' individual needs and backgrounds as well as educational goals, facilitates productive, challenging and satisfying learning. Teachers in the course are aware that a non-threatening and sympathetic approach to teaching is the basis of such a relationship. This is particularly important when many of the experiences and ideas the women encounter during the course contradict those they have been familiar with in the past.

From the responses of the women at Gilmour College it would seem that the nature of the relationships they established with their teachers contributed greatly to the success of the course, and was one of its most memorable elements. Their experiences of learning in this environment, and of the teacher-student relationship, contrasted markedly with those they remembered from their school years ("...[at school] there was some sort of barrier, the teacher's up there and you're here"). All of the women spoke positively about the personal styles and teaching techniques of the teachers in the course. They described them as "warm", "sympathetic", "honest", "hardworking", and "approachable". Despite their varying frustrations and doubts about the course, to nearly all the women this group of teachers' commitment to their needs was obvious. The informality of their relationship with the teachers, and of the arrangements and activities in the classroom, made them "...more relaxed, like a gathering rather than a teacher-student relationship, which you don't really need".

This informal atmosphere lessened the apprehension most of the women felt when first entering the course. It has been an average of twenty-one years since the women in this group were in a classroom. Their memories of teachers appeared to be dominated by the authority the teachers from their school years held in the classroom, and the hierarchical relationship this authority permited them to establish with students. The teachers in the NOW course at Gilmour College worked to establish a more informal relationship with students based on the understanding that in many respects as adult women they, and the students were peers. Like many of the women, Ingrid felt that the informality of this relationship gave her the confidence and impetus to participate in class discussions:

Ingrid It was very strange for the first and second week. I don't think I asked questions for quite a while of the teachers.

Wendy Do they feel like teachers to you?

Ingrid No, no. And that makes a difference. They're very much like us, you see, that's where it is all...that you have so much confidence to them. Things developed for my better.

Wendy From that relationship?

Ingrid Yes. See they're teaching us as adults, trying to take us where we are, knowing that we've been in the house for so many years, you know, and taking us in the right way.

"Taking us in the right way" seemed to follow from the women's realisation that their experiences and expertise would be acknowledged ("...when she asks what we think about something, I'm amazed...when was the last time anybody asked you for your opinion on anything?"). In class discussions the teachers spoke about their own lives and the reasons for the choices they made, which reinforced the status and experiences they shared with the group as adult women:

> Well, they weren't peers, they were teachers. But they were teachers that could relate as an equal also. They didn't sort of say, 'Well I'm the teacher and you're the student, and never the twain shall meet,' sort of thing. Oh, no, it wasn't like that at all.

Thus the teachers were more open to questions and criticisms from the class, reducing the potential alienation that their expertise as teachers could induce. Sofia, Ingrid and Tanya experienced this alienation in a very different teaching style they met with in a later TAFE course:

> ...you should see our teacher! He stands there seven feet tall, with a big belly there, and he is *an authority*. He said, 'I will have you all draw the balance sheet at the end of this course, not because you're good, but because I'm a good teacher!'

"Taking us in the right way" also seemed to derive from the teachers' awareness of the effects of suburban isolation, lowered self-confidence and the group's lack of practice with formal learning processes. Many of the women felt this awareness was evident in the teachers' attitude towards them as students ("...helpful and very understanding and very patient, not teaching down to us. It was important to have a teacher that appeared to go that little bit extra"). While some of the ideas in the course may have been threatening, it seemed that most of the women felt the teachers themselves were rarely intimidating. The intimidatory and dismissive style of teaching Ingrid encountered in her second TAFE course made it difficult for her to make progress:

> You don't know what to do and then you call him over. Oh! you're scared. And he comes over and he goes dop-dop-dop [on the keyboard] and then he walks away. And then when you say, 'What do I do now?', he says, 'What I just did before'.

One of the causes of group conflict in the course was the antagonism expressed by one or two in the class towards other ethnic groups. Some of those women who were angered by this hostility were also aware that the teachers did not support it. This refusal to endorse these viewpoints gave them confidence in the teachers and a greater feeling of security in their place in the group. Racism proved to be a problem again for Sofia, Tanya and Ingrid after the NOW course, amongst some teachers as well as students:

> I'll tell you what, the teacher has made remarks about his other classes where he's got 'nothing but lebos'. I know I'm not a lebo, but it has the same effect on those people [as on] my kind, you know, it's all one thing...[In the NOW course] we were all equal, isn't it? [The teachers] were talking about migrants as though they were human beings, and not just 'them over there, Sofia and those ones in the middle'...Oh, yes, I felt more comfortable [in the NOW course], there was no difference made there!...I think the teachers [in the other course] don't even notice, and the ones that do notice take no notice, they overlook it...I stopped participating for a long time.

While the teachers appeared, as Ingrid said, "very much like us", it was obvious that there were also many important differences between the teachers and the women in the group. Despite the fact that their manner and styles of dress were as varied as the women's themselves, and that in age they were the women's peers, their seemingly well-established careers, their qualifications and their apparent adherence to a feminist philosophy set them apart from the women in the group. These differences were felt most sharply in their relationships with Lesley, the Women, Work and Society teacher.

The ideas debated in Women, Work and Society placed considerable pressure on the women in the course. The responsibility for presenting these ideas in as accessible and non-threatening a manner as possible also places great pressure on the Women, Work and Society teachers. Women, Work and Society teachers are acutely aware of this responsibility, and the extent to which the women's response to feminism is an emotional as well as intellectual one. In her roles as the Women, Work and Society teacher and the course co-ordinator, Lesley played a more dominant part in the women's experience of the course. Almost all of the group were drawn to her by her enthusiasm, obvious commitment to their interests, matter-of-fact manner and sense of humour ("...she's easy to relate to, you know, kind of crazy. I like that"). However, while most of the group felt that Lesley was sympathetic and approachable, many also seemed to be disturbed by the contrast between particular aspects of her life and their own. These feelings contributed to a certain anxiety and ambivalence about feminists and feminist thinking:

> I feel as if...like, I like Lesley, I can relate to a lot of things she says. She's very down-to-earth but I also think she's very determined and she knows what she wants. I suppose really I'm envious of that, maybe that's what it is. Because you know she's no airs and graces really and I like that in her. But I feel as if I should be better at what I'm doing. I should be a better person, a stronger person, I should know what I want in life and go and get it because that's what I see in her. I feel inadequate I suppose, and if I don't come up with the right answers I feel as if I'm a real dickhead.

Through her role as the Women, Work and Society teacher, Lesley came to represent feminist thinking in the course as a whole, and the women formulated many of their responses to these ideas through their relationship with her. While all of them seemed to like and respect her, and to appreciate many of her personal qualities, in coming to terms with feminism in whatever way was finally comfortable for them, they were often angry with her and the part she played in the course. The obvious and very important differences between her life and theirs provided grounds upon which many of the women could refute feminist arguments ("She doesn't understand, she doesn't have kids"). In this process, their anger with Lesley and their anger with feminism became a linked response to this challenge to their thinking. However, for reasons discussed more fully in the following chapter, this anger gradually abated over the life of the course. Lesley became the teacher they remembered most after the course, because of the affection they developed for her, and because of all the subjects, Women, Work and Society demanded the most from them.

Some of the women in the group felt they preferred women teachers. Their perceptions of male teachers were usually based on unhappy past student-teacher relationships in school years, or in the case of some of the women who were educated in convents a greater familiarity with women teachers:

> [Male teachers] have a tendency to make me sort of back off. I don't feel comfortable...I've always felt better with women teachers. It's probably because I got yelled at.

The unassuming calm and gentleness of John, the Technical Drawing teacher, contributed to the way in which many of the women grew to like what seemed initially an unproductive "waste of time". His highly approachable personal style and patient involvement in their learning contrasted in particular with Tanya's previous experiences with male teachers:

> I liked him, he was a really good teacher. Oh, he was nice! You could just see he was nice. He was always smiling and he was good at coming to help you, or you could go and ask him for help. He was really great.

From the women's responses to these teachers, it would appear that a supportive approach to teaching which focuses closely on the women's needs and establishes a student-teacher relationship based on co-operation and mutual respect does encourage and enhance learning. However, despite the use of this teaching approach in the course at Gilmour College throughout the four and a half months of the course two women in the group remained unwilling to reveal the nature and source of the learning difficulties they encountered.

Julie's and Tanya's memories of their powerlessness in the past to make teachers and students helpfully and sympathetically respond to their needs made them wary of speaking too freely in the course. Their relationships with one or two of the other students reinforced this caution. Neither of them fully understood all the facts involved in their own educational histories, and thus suffered the misery of blaming themselves for becoming illiterate in the first place, and then for being unable to overcome it. They had neither the confidence nor the evidence to argue that since illiteracy was not their fault, they could legitimately ask that the situation be rectified. Unfortunately, the evidence that they needed to do this was not provided in the course. The issue of literacy and numeracy amongst women was not given as a topic for class discussion, which in their case was a significant oversight. However, while literacy and numeracy problems were not catered for by the course or discussed as an issue in class, the relationships they established with the teachers went a long way towards changing their perceptions of what learning could be like:

> Like, sometimes when I did good, which wasn't very often, I thought, oh wow! this is great! I wanted to do more...when Sue read my letter [for a job application] in the class, she goes, 'This is great. You've got the job!' Oh, I was really happy. I rang up my sister and I told her how the teacher reacted and...I just wanted to keep on trying to get the same...See, it's in the course, the teachers, the blackboards, it's all there! The teachers mainly! It's all up there on the board, but even if you have to find out where it is, you can still ask them because they've made that wide open. Ring them and ask them, or tell them if you're having any problem.

Yet despite the confidence and security they felt within the classroom, and their awareness that the teachers were genuinely interested in their progress, and in many respects were people they could identify with, neither of them reached the point of breaking years of silence:

> Wendy Why didn't you tell her even though you liked her?
>
> Julie Because I felt, like in the morning sometimes I'd get off the train at Gilmour and I'd see her sometimes and we walked up together. I just didn't want to embarrass myself...She never made me feel that way but I thought, no, I'll wait until I know what I'm talking about then maybe...I sort of felt like because Lesley is a teacher and she knows everything, and even though I like the person

that she is and I'd like to be there one day, it was hard for me to talk to her because I couldn't find, you know...She'd say, 'Oh, how is this and that?', and I really wish I could've rambled on about really how I felt inside to her, but it wasn't coming out. It was just, 'Oh, great, great, yeah!'

For both of these women, the quality of their relationships with teachers and other students was an important determining factor in developing the confidence to approach learning again. From her experiences in the course, Tanya argued that the personal and professional qualities teachers use to build relationships with the students are significant for all the women in the NOW course:

Wendy ...What would you need from a teacher to help you?

Tanya Probably time, to keep telling me, telling me, telling me, until it's tattooed in my brain, that's what I'd say - time...I asked her how come this, how come that, and she said da, da, da, da, and told me. And I said but, and I kept asking her and she kept telling me, and I asked her again and she told me again and then it clicked! It clicked, and I was happy because I understood.

Wendy ...there's particular qualities about teachers in NOW courses...like genuine interest, patience, willingness to listen and...

Tanya You need those qualities, yes. You must have them! Especially when you're dealing with, like the NOW course you have to have them because otherwise the students would dwindle away...They need that encouragement...but at the same time not in an abrupt way...Forceful is not good because you just fall right away, but if you do it in a sort of encouraging way, they'll try, they'll try. Not because they're being forced to but because they want to, because it's been put to them in a good way. They're getting a positive feedback. It's important to have that positive. If it's negative - bye, bye!

Mature Age Women's Approach to Learning

A number of points can be drawn from these discussions which could contribute to our understanding of the ways in which mature age women learn. While a systematic exploration of this issue was outside the scope of this research, it would be useful to speculate on the characteristics of mature age women's learning techniques, on the basis of information that is available here.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, for nearly all of the women in this course, their school curriculum prepared them for occupations which were based on manual skills (principally shorthand, typing and business studies) rather than skills in the formulation and communication of ideas. This focus on particular manual skills was later reinforced in the kinds of office and factory jobs most of them acquired in the workforce. It is likely that any training they received once they were in the workforce would have been for the purpose of developing skills directly related to their work. It is also likely that this on-the-job training would have been acquired through informal instruction given by supervisors and other workmates, rather than through formal lessons. The style of this training would have been highly participatory and experiential, that is, based on verbal interactions during practical demonstrations, given over short periods of time, in a work rather than classroom environment. Because of the hands-on nature of this form of training, there would also have been constant and immediate feedback on their progress in the mastery of skills. Thus any increase in their skills and knowledge would have been evident in the daily performance of their work, rather than through the more formalised processes of assessment and accreditation. In their lives as housewives and mothers it is likely that their learning processes were also based on the development of task-oriented skills relevant to domestic work and childrearing, through discussions and practical demonstrations with other adults.

It would seem therefore that task-oriented skills, hands-on learning, an emphasis on verbal communication in interaction, and high levels of personal participation are the four key elements of adult women's learning experiences. However, while it is possible to argue that these may have been the processes characteristic of mature age women's learning, it could also be said that their understanding and perception of what learning means and should feel like, would be based more on their experiences at school, than on the ways in which they developed skills as adults in the workplace and at home. Learning these skills during adulthood may be perceived as part of their work and domestic obligations, rather than as part of their education. Learning, in the common sense of study, text books, teachers and classrooms, for the group of women at Gilmour ended when they were fifteen ("...once you came out of school, that was it!"). Thus it could be argued that while as adults these women have developed particular practices of learning such as those described above, their memories and expectations of what learning is are those of their adolescence. To the extent that this speculative model of mature age women's learning is correct, it could account for some of the difficulties the women encountered in settling into the course. They may not have been aware of differences between the learning modes employed at school, those related to the workplace and home, and those used during the NOW course, which could have contributed to their confusion and anxiety about learning in the course.

4.4 A Feminist Analysis:

"It's hard being confronted with these things"

The rationale and design of the NOW course are based on an analysis of the discrimination women experience in employment and education. In light of this analysis, the course aims to equip women with the skills and information which will enable them to overcome these inequalities. To fulfil this purpose the course provides not only skills and information relevant to employment and education, but also seeks as its first objective, to develop in students a critical awareness of the "social, political and economic situation of women" (NOW Syllabus, p.3), which will allow them to make more informed future choices.

An argument underlying this first course objective is that greater information provides opportunities for better personal choices. This is one of the foundation principles of education generally. A related argument is that NOW students also need an appropriate critical analysis, that is a feminist analysis, of women as a social group, to be able to make personal choices which are beneficial and relevant to their individual lives. This is one of the principles of education from a feminist viewpoint, particularly of re-entry education developed for women who want to change their direction and circumstances. A critical awareness of their circumstances as women is developed in the students in the NOW course through becoming conscious of the ways in which they share membership in this wider social group. Consciousness of this common membership, or sisterhood, is derived from the connections students make between their individual experiences and those of women collectively, through exploration of facts, analysis and alternatives presented during the course.

This exploration occurs principally in the Work Strand of the course in the subject Women, Work & Society (often called Women and Work). Women and Work also functions as the "central core" of the course, providing the means by which students "experience the whole course as a logical and integrated totality" (NOW Syllabus, Women, Work & Society, p.2). The subject also acts as a facilitator and clearing house for issues, problems and grievances which occur elsewhere in the course. Thus philosophically, educationally and structurally, Women and Work has been designed to play a significant role in the processes of the course, and to act as a catalyst in developing the world views and personal perceptions of the students. The discussion which follows will consider the women's responses to this subject and its role in the course, to determine the extent to which it meets its objectives.

The subject Women and Work presents a feminist analysis of women's position not only in the workforce, but also in education, the family and the media, and traces the processes through which these social structures discriminate against women. Using this information and analysis, the content of Women and Work then focuses on how the women's future choices regarding work or study can take into account these structural effects on their lives, enabling them to make more informed decisions. In so doing, the content of this subject challenges the women to think about their lives, their self-images and their attitudes to women's roles generally.

Some of these new ideas may come into conflict with those held by other members of the family. When the class was asked early in Women and Work, 'What is the definition of a feminist?', Sneja replied:

> Oh if my husband knew that this is what we're doing in this course he'd say, 'Is that what our taxpayers money is going on, so that you can go to tech and learn those sorts of things?'

Rhonda felt her husband would be even less sympathetic:

> I couldn't tell you some of the things he calls feminists, it's too awful. He's got some pretty...he says they're ratbags and troublemakers.

Despite reports of views such as these however, throughout the course none of the women spoke of conflict at home generated by the ideas they brought from this particular subject. This apparent lack of conflict seems to have been partly the result of the women's own strong defence of their position as housewives and mothers, and their own and their husbands' interpretations of how and why it is that women come to take these particular roles. The greatest conflict seemed to arise not with other members of the family or with friends, but within the women themselves. For the first half of the course their overall response to a feminist analysis of women's lives was a contradictory one. At various times they all expressed a mixture of anger and agreement with these ideas. While defending their position in society as women, they also acknowledged that this position, which they endorsed, had not been in their best interests.

Kay's divorce was preceded by periods of violence inflicted on her by her husband, yet her experience of some of the worst aspects of relations between men and women, and her refusal to endure them, did not provide an opening through which a more feminist awareness of her position, and that of all women, could become part of her thinking. Like many of the women in the group, she was already aware of many of the issues raised in the subject Women and Work and of their relevance to her life. However, her strong commitment to the Mormon Church came into conflict with the analysis of these issues presented in this subject, and her early reaction to it was often one of anger:

> ...it seems like they're trying to change us, change our way of thinking. I agree with equal opportunities, but I don't really agree with this feminisim that's being rammed down our throats... I hate it. Like, sure enough, we all know about it but there's nothing we can really do about it. We did all those [statistics on women] at church too, but we don't make a big thing about it. It's just the facts of life...They're trying to change nature, and women will have more problems than we want or expect so I feel, push that out the window.

Regardless of their ages or ethnic backgrounds, many of the women's comments about Women and Work echoed those of Kay. For most of them, this was their first contact with women who called themselves feminists, and their first exposure to discussions of feminist ideas. Many of them argued that the analysis offered by feminism was out of

touch with reality, and saw feminists as either "the extreme, aggressive kind who go out into the streets", or "career women" who focus solely on their own lives and refuse to take on the sacrifices and responsibilities of marriage and childrearing.

To most of the group, their women teachers, in particular Lesley, the Women and Work teacher, fitted into the latter category. Having defined them as career women, the group could then argue that these teachers did not have the personal concerns and interpretations of the world that they did, and therefore could not understand the constraints imposed upon them and the reasoning behind the choices they made. Many of the women were also concerned that this consistent focus in class discussions on their lives as women, which they had never experienced before, meant that feminism promoted a hostile separatism, exclusive of men. Like many of the women, Angela felt that sometimes Women and Work was more an expression of "man-hating" than a critical analysis of relations between men and women. This was despite her greater sympathy with feminist thinking:

> I get the impression Lesley hates men and it comes across. She's right in what she's saying, but she just seems so strong. I think at times they're the real bastards myself, but I still think they're there and we need them, and not workwise or anything like that, we just need them emotionally.

Like most of the women who found feminism "unrealistic", Rhonda's response to Women and Work was grounded in her understanding of the possible effects these ideas would have on relationships within her family. To her, the changes in the sexual division of labour within the family which feminism seemed to be arguing for, particularly with regard to childcare, were just not possible:

> ...I can't just turn around and get my husband to do things, he's got enough to do already. Lesley doesn't have kids so she doesn't understand...there's no reality to what she says. She obviously doesn't understand what happens when you've got to consider other people...What am I supposed to say to the kids - 'Go away, leave me alone, mother has her own life'? I can't just stop and say to them, 'Well now *I* want to do what *I* want to do', and expect them to understand that. It's a lot more complicated than that.

Thus during the first half of the course many of the women seemed to believe that the end point of feminism was a denial of women's commitments at home, and a radical re-arrangement of their personal lives. To them, the adoption of a feminist perspective on an oppression they readily acknowledged would result in complete disruption of a set of emotional, social and economic relationships they had worked long and hard to establish.

Not all of the group felt that accepting a feminist analysis would lead to family disruption. Angela's response to the feminist component of the course arose from connections she made between ideas discussed in the course, and her interpretations of events in her own life. These events and interpretations had already developed within her a greater

awareness of the differences between men's and women's lives. Although during the course she did not call herself a feminist, and felt that feminism was "pushed on us" in Women and Work, in her daily life she seemed to take offence at sexist practices more readily than many of the other women:

> Darryl and I were watching T.V....and there was an ad. for dishwashing liquid and I said, 'That's sexist', and it was, it was terribly sexist. And he said to me, 'Oh you've been back to school have you?'. But I didn't bite, I just left it. I thought, right you'll keep, it'll come up again and I'll just wait. So later he said, 'What's sexist?', and I said very coolly, without biting or getting upset, 'It's ignorance, Darryl', and that shut him up! Later in the week he was going to a cocktail party and I know it's an excuse for a piss up with the boys. You know if I went out on the weekend he'd call it a piss up, but he wouldn't do the same for what he does.

Although Angela felt feminism played far too great a part in the course, and did nothing more than "tell us what we already know", its ideas and arguments seemed to be more in line with her own feelings on these issues, and therefore less disturbing for her. All of her family were overseas, she was no longer married, and divorce had taught her "never to get myself into a situation like that again". Thus in contrast in particular with the married women in the group, she was freer to rearrange her personal and family relationships, should there be any changes in her way of thinking.

Most of the small group of single younger women responded to Women and Work in a manner similar to Angela's. They agreed with the feminist arguments that were congruent with their interpretations of their own experiences, and began using these to build a wider understanding of discrimination against women generally. Angela, Tanya and Julie were aware of the differences between these feelings and their responses to this subject, and those of the women with husbands. Tanya felt that:

> ...it's because they're married they don't want to hear it. Maybe they go back and discuss it with their husbands and their husbands put their foot down or get aggravated over it. So they tend to think, rather than upset their husbands, it's not on, this thing's no good...Whereas with me, I haven't got someone else here, a male's attitude, there's just me and that's that.

These women were also conscious of the attitudes behind the disparaging remarks some of the married women made about single mothers. The contrast between their difficult social and economic circumstances and the relative security of the women in two-parent families provided a starting point from which feminist explanations of the patterns in women's lives could begin to make sense. Julie was particularly angry with what she saw was the complacency with which some of the women in two-parent families denied both their economic vulnerability as housebound women dependent on breadwinning husbands, and feminists' theoretical and political concerns about this. By denying their own vulnerability, these women could refuse to acknowledge that the experiences she and others had been through could also happen to them, and that solidarity amongst women was an essential first step in bringing this vulnerabililty to an end:

> It's really good what Lesley's talking about, it's really good to have someone like her around because women are still being used. I know because I see women used every day...And look at [the married women]. You can tell they've got a happy life even though they've got problems. So they turn a blind eye. Because everything's sweet today, they don't want to know. People like that annoy me. They don't want to know about *that*, you know, that doesn't happen to us so we push it aside. But as soon as it comes up they're the first people to complain about it. That really makes me angry. What Lesley's talking about is true, right. I mean, they might have cushy little wimps for husbands but there are people out there who don't.

Overall, the group's initial response to the feminist content in the course was one of varying degrees of resistance. However, this resistance cannot be theorized simply as a form of false consciousness. All of the women were well aware of the complex emotional, social and economic circumstances of their lives. Their early response to this subject was to measure feminism against these circumstances, rather than re-interpret these in the light of a feminist analysis, and in so doing to find feminism wanting. Their relationships with husbands, children, families and friends seemed to be ones that most of them were happy with, or by now had learnt to accept. Amongst the married women in particular, mixed in with this acceptance was a hard-nosed pragmatism. Their husbands had jobs, they did not and the bills had to be paid:

> I don't think that we can do anything about a lot of things. I think that somebody has to do the housework and look after the kids and since he's the one that's working, that's got the full-time job, since he makes more money than me anyway, I'm the one that has to compromise and so I'm the one who has to stay home with the kids. I wouldn't have had them if I hadn't wanted to stay home for them anyway, so it doesn't really matter. I think that a lot of what's said is not like life really is.

This initial response to the feminist content within the course was also a contradictory one. On the one hand they argued that they "already [knew] about all this", but on the other they denied its relevance to their lives. It could be said therefore that their resistance was not to feminist arguments *per se*, but to the rather threatening changes that many of them felt acceptance of this analysis would bring about. If they allowed feminism to become relevant to them, then its arguments would become difficult to deny in their daily lives.

There appears to have been a number of sources for this contradictory and thus ambivalent response to Women and Work. As discussed earlier, nearly every woman in this group placed particular importance on the obligations women have towards their children. These obligations were believed to be the outcome of a natural, and not social, affinity between women and motherhood. Amongst some of the women in two-parent families, not only was motherhood considered a natural state for women, but married motherhood was also believed to be its only legitimate social expression. As far as can be

determined, only two or three of the group had any experience of domestic violence, and none spoke of sexual harassment or abuse in their personal lives. Although these more personally immediate and sometimes violent manifestations of imbalanced power relations between men and women were also considered in class discussions, few of the women acknowledged that these forms of discrimination and oppression are widespread. This may have derived from a possible lack of personal experience of these issues.

Their doubts about the credibility of the information contained in Women and Work also seemed to derive from their previous experiences in the workforce. Many of the women argued that discrimination against women does not exist in the forms and to the extent described to them in the course. In their view, they had had very little experience of it in their lives, particularly their working lives, which proved that the feminist position was overstated. As is obvious from their work histories most of these women have worked in all-female environments, in those sections of the labour market which have traditionally been the province of women:

> ...it's just that I never thought of it that way. I never competed with any men for a job before and maybe it would've struck me before if I was in the workforce and if I was in competition with men and maybe then I would say, 'Why is he getting the job when I have more ability', or something like that.

Many of the women also assessed the credibility of arguments about workplace discrimination by contrasting their circumstances with those of Lesley and the other women teachers. While they agreed that discrimination probably operates in certain advanced career levels "like Lesley's", it did not seem in their view to have much bearing on the labour market they intended entering:

> ...we never had a chance to face up to the situation that Lesley is talking about. Like, professors in the universities and things like that. It is irrelevant to us, isn't it? She is talking about clerical jobs which she says we should not take, but these are the jobs we will probably get...She is at a level where she can think of advancing her career and fighting for a job where a man gets it and she's not getting it. But as for us the relevant jobs are also jobs normally for women so striving for her level is irrelevant for us.

Much of the early section of the subject Women and Work explores the structural processes which bring about women's particular social position, by focusing on the women's own experiences and circumstances. For many of the women this focus on their personal lives in an educational setting was an unexpected and unfamiliar experience, and did not seem a valid or necessary pre-requisite for learning. Nearly all of them seemed unskilled in the intellectual process of moving from the particular to the general when theorizing about the effects of social structures on individual lives. Thus the practice of systematically connecting individual experiences with wider social patterns was an

unfamiliar and difficult one. These difficulties may have been reinforced by the nature and purpose of their past education. In their families and at school, it seems that the purpose of learning was the development of vocationally oriented skills. By contrast, the aim of much of Women and Work is the development of new ways of thinking about ideas, and new skills in the interpretation of information.

Finally, the bench mark against which Women and Work was consistently measured was its capacity to help them move back into the workforce or education. Most of the group felt that while the information in Women and Work might be valuable to them as women, it would be of very little interest to employers:

> I mean, if I'm going for an interview for a job, they won't discuss with me how much I know about women's roles. They will see what work I present, like let's say, I put in for a secretarial job, how good is my English, how well is it presented and things like that...men don't care much about that stuff and they are still the ones that give you an interview most times.

Although Women and Work initially was the subject which drew the most hostility and resistance from the group, by the end of the course it proved to be the most popular of all the subjects the women had studied. It was described by almost all of them as relevant, useful, beneficial and challenging. It would seem therefore that the hostility and anxiety first expressed by many of the group had been replaced by a growing acceptance and understanding of feminist interpretations of women's position. The changes in their attitudes and feelings came about slowly over the weeks as the women responded to the challenge of the course as a whole, became more confident in themselves as students, and in turn more conscious of "what happens when you broaden your horizons".

The content of Women and Work is divided into two parts. The first aims to raise the students' awareness of women's issues through the presentation of relevant information and ideas. The subject then changes its focus midway through the eighteen weeks, to consider questions directly related to the students' career development. During the second half, the group explored educational and vocational options and the links between the two, and began preparing for job applications with resumés, trial job interviews, visits to career centres and taking part in one week's Work Experience. The knowledge and skills developed in this second section of Women and Work may have contributed to some of the group's changed perceptions of this subject. The skills and information taught in the latter half of the subject are precisely those which almost two-thirds of the group were hoping to gain from the course as a whole when they first enrolled. Preparing their job resumés helped many realise that they already had a wide range of skills and experience ("That resumé, it took me hours. I didn't know I'd done so much"). Trial job interviews lessened anxieties about their capacity to perform in this particularly stressful situation, and the work experience week towards the end of the course gave them an introduction back into the workforce which was reassuring and illuminating:

> I really enjoyed it. There were four of us there, three social work students on placement and a new office girl and me. And because I like to get into things quickly and get going, at first they thought I was a full-time social worker. They didn't realise I was just there on

> work experience. That made me feel so good. But now I'm all confused. I thought I'd do data entry after this, but now I don't know. I think I might do something more, something in welfare.

The knowledge that they were capable of re-entering the world of nine to five was reinforced by other aspects of their experiences in the course. Their confidence in their abilities increased as they began practising a variety of communication skills. As the course moved into its second month the information and techniques, they were learning in technical subjects such as Computing and Technical Drawing began to accumulate into a sizeable body of skills which reinforced their self-confidence. After a couple of months of coming to college, they had developed well organised routines which co-ordinated their college timetables with their work at home, demonstrating that they could manage returning to work ("...then I realised, you know, you get up every morning, come here, then go home and do what you have to do. If you can't do that then you really can't go to work either").

While it is possible to draw conclusions about their responses to the work-related component of Women and Work, it is much more difficult to assess the impact of feminist thinking upon their perceptions of their circumstances and their roles as women. When questioned about the usefulness of learning about women's history and position in society, all the women agreed that "it is important to know about these things". However, while the facts about women's position were considered important and valuable information by almost everyone in the group, feminist interpretations of these facts, and the personal and social implications that could follow from these, remained open to debate.

By the end of the course, the group appeared to have adopted a variety of positions in response to the feminist content of Women and Work. Some of the older women like Sneja, Sofia and Ingrid distanced themselves from feminist analyses by arguing that "these things are good to know but I have my own thoughts about them. You have your ideas, and I have mine". The difference between "your ideas" and "mine" seemed to have been based on the argument that, because of their special responsibilities as mothers, in the end women's place is at home with their children:

> I wouldn't go to the extreme. I still think woman's role is at home if it becomes necessary to choose between man and a wife, I would still think that it's a woman's place at home. I still haven't changed that much but I have changed quite a lot.

Like many of the women with children, Rhonda felt that feminists were women who did not understand "what it's like to have kids", and that their ideas were unmanageable and therefore unrealistic. Ranasinghe argued that these ideas were not relevant to her because they bore no relationship to her experience:

> Of course it makes me aware of these situations but since I am from a totally different background, that doesn't affect me so much, although it's an education in itself. But the kinds of problems that the local women faced I had never faced. Coming from an upperclass Indian society it rarely happened. It's different. I'm not part of it

> really. I can understand what the feeling is about but I don't really feel the same kind of women's feelings that a woman feels when she is oppressed and things like that. I had a different kind of upbringing than this. I'm very conscious that it's not my world.

Of all the group, the younger women appeared most influenced by the arguments and directions offered in much of the content of Women and Work. Tanya and Julie's analyses of their own lives and those of women they had known, were reinforced by the knowledge they gained from this subject. Since neither of them had any on-going close relationships with men, this process may have been a little easier. Of this smaller group, only Angela had such a long-term relationship. The connections she made between her own ideas about women's lives and feminist arguments began to influence her interpretations of the dynamics of this relationship:

> Oh, more strained. I always blamed me, I'd think, oh, you bad tempered one, and now I look at it and think, Christ! I'm not...he doesn't listen [that's what it is]. Why is it that I come home after a night out [by ourselves] and I feel angry and frustrated? I always feel like I've been out on my own, and I've been trying to figure it out. Like on Friday night, he just went on and on the whole time and I sat there and I thought, Mr. Wonderful, you know, sarcastic like. Then I thought, it must be the insecurity of him, if he has to mouth off from the word go, make me feel like I wasn't there. It's not me at all.

While there developed in the group differing perceptions of the place of feminism in their personal lives, as the course progressed all the women experienced the beginnings of a new sense of commonality and solidarity with other women, ("I didn't realise women had been fighting for women for so long. Now that I've found out all this...it makes me proud"). Their developing awareness of themselves as members of a social group was reinforced in practice by the bonds they began forming with each other as women within the smaller group at college.

While it is difficult to evaluate within the terms of this research what behavioural, attitudinal and material changes have occurred in these women's lives that could be a direct outcome of their exposure to feminist thinking, from their comments it is clear that they are more aware of the forces which operate in women's lives generally. In their conversations since completing the course almost all of them referred to Lesley, the Women and Work teacher, in a way which seemed to suggest that she had become symbolic for many of them of a particular way of thinking. They would often consider what Lesley would say or do in situations they had encountered since leaving Gilmour College and the course, and assess the merits of what was happening to them in terms they believed she would use, as well as their own ("Well, I suppose if Lesley were here she'd say..."). They also seemed to apply the knowledge about women's lives they had gained from Women and Work when making judgments about outside events ("Look at this thing in the paper about our local councillors. Those men tried to keep women out of Council committee meetings!"). They appeared more willing and capable of recognising

their worth as individual women, and more prepared to demand that others recognise this also. While it would seem that many of them remained unsure about feminist analyses of women's position, it is clear that these ideas have given them a wider scope in which to view their own lives, and a greater knowledge upon which to base decisions about their future directions.

4.5 A Statement of Attainment:

"It made you discover what was important"

It is now over a year since the NOW course at Gilmour College finished in July, 1986. In that time most of the women in the group have made a number of changes in their lives, many of which appear to have been encouraged by their experiences in the course. They have also encountered a variety of difficulties, some of which are new to them, while others they have met before.

In their attempts to move back into the workforce, many of the women in the group have faced a common set of problems. From their comments since the course, it seems that appropriate childcare for their children while they are at work is a major obstacle to full-time employment. Allied to this is their concern about the quality of care they are able to give their children once so much of their time and energy are taken up by the demands of their jobs. This is of particular concern to the women with young children. Full-time work also presents problems with housework. Many of the women have agreed that their husbands and children would help with shopping, cooking and cleaning if they were asked, yet seem reluctant to do so because they are "already full-up" with either their jobs or school. Thus, almost all of the group face a double day's workload if they take up full-time employment.

Most of the women's families are in the lower income brackets, particularly those on Supporting Parents Benefit. A second job in the family would provide some financial relief, yet would also incur expenses involved in travel, clothes, food and possible child-care costs. The older women are also concerned that their age is a handicap in competing for work in a difficult labour market ("They only want the young ones they can train. It really is an employer's market. They treat you like a grey haired old lady"). All of them have reported being frustrated in job applications since the course by the twin problems of outdated qualifications and no recent work experience. Many of them are in the bind of "you can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job. So what do you do?!" Transport presents another set of problems. Most of the two-parent families have one car, which is often needed by the husband for getting to work. Childcare is difficult to organise if travelling is involved, especially for the women who are single parents, as none of them have their own transport.

These seem to have been the principal difficulties that the group at Gilmour needed to resolve in order to return to work. Conversely, work was seen as a solution to some of these problems, particularly financial ones. It is beyond the capacity of the NOW course to provide solutions to many of these problems, and the women are still coping with them months later. However, as we shall see, there have been considerable qualitative and material changes in the women's lives since last year, many of which they attribute to their participation in the course.

Of the fifteen women in the group, seven have re-entered the workforce, six in part-time and one in full-time employment. Margaret, Jeanette and Helen are working part-time as clerks and clerical assistants either in the city or in local offices. Patricia works part-time as a representative for a retailing firm. Rhonda is an aide at a local handicapped children's centre and is hoping for full-time work there, and Ranasinghe has a full-time job as

a clerical assistant with the public service. Patricia, Helen, Jeanette and Ranasinghe left the course before finishing it to start work. Angela had planned to enrol in a photography course at the beginning of this year that would enable her to work on the local newspaper, but the timetabling of the course and the travel involved clashed with her son Andrew's schedule. She was recently notified of an increase in her rent, and as she is on Supporting Parents Benefit, feels that for the moment, "getting a job at the local club or something" must take priority over more training.

Of the group, nine went on to some form of further education. Ingrid, Tanya and Sofia completed the Business INTO Course at Gilmour College, Margaret enrolled in a typing course there, Julie spent eight months with Basic Education at a nearby TAFE College, and Rhonda and Sneja have finished a TAFE introductory welfare course. Loretta has completed a six month data entry course which she "did very well in", and is now looking for office work. Kay began a secretarial studies course at a local TAFE, but has been forced to give it up because her two pre-school age children "aren't happy with Day Care, they miss me and get upset a lot".

From most of the women's comments on how they feel about themselves since leaving Gilmour over a year ago, it would seem that the course contributed greatly to an increase in confidence and self-esteem, and a new assertiveness in dealing with people and situations that previously had been intimidating or alienating ("I know where to go now to get things, and they can't fob me off so easily. I guess I'm getting cheeky"). These changes in self-perceptions have derived not only from making the transition from home into the new environment of the course, but also from practical activities like learning new skills, developing job application techniques, and increased information about facilities and services like training options, childcare, community groups and avenues for job seeking. The combination of information, new skills and practical activities in the course provided a stronger and more informed basis from which to develop future options, and the confidence to "give it a go":

> ...the course wasn't really into work, you know, it was mainly for us to work out what we wanted to do...it's not back into the workforce, it sort of gets you out of the house and gets you thinking, get out there and see what's out there. And that's better in a way because it gives you more confidence.

All of the women in the group give very high priority to the needs of their children, and their responsibilities as mothers. The course provided them with an important opportunity to test the limits of time, energy and organisation that would be required if they were to move back into full-time outside commitments. Although Kay would like eventually to do a data entry course, from her experience at Gilmour she feels that full-time study is still a long way off while her children are so young:

> I didn't think it'd be so hard with kids and all...It's given me a real insight into what I'd have to do to study. The kids are so little and they missed me so much [during the course]. I can't commit myself unrealistically.

To those who work or study on a regular basis, leaving home for a different environment is an everyday occurrence. For many women whose lives have centred almost solely around their homes and their families' concerns and who have been away from paid work or education for many years, walking into a strange environment to become involved in activities and commitments very different from those they know so well is almost overwhelming. On the Information Day, Julie and I were sitting together in the corridor while she waited to be interviewed:

> You know, I was so nervous before I came here. I left the house and I got so scared I went back home again, and I was sitting there thinking I couldn't do it. I've thought and thought about this for years, but you don't know what you can do, you know. You ask people and they make you feel such an idiot. I was thinking, why don't I know that really my place is at home waiting for the kids after school.

Nearly all of the women remarked that it would have been very hard to go on to work or study as they have done, without "doing the NOW course first. I couldn't have coped". Tanya argued that:

> The NOW course, it did some good things...[it] helped me in a lot of ways. It got me to mix with people. You wouldn't believe how I was before the course. I stayed here, day after day, week after week! I went out, did my shopping, came home, stayed home, shopping again, stayed home. That's all I did! Watch T.V., clean up, that was it. Then I went to the course...I came out of there and I'd learnt a whole lot of things about myself, a whole lot.

The effectiveness of the course in supporting that initial move is evident in the fear many of them expressed during the course that without a job or some form of study after NOW, they would have to return to the life they had known before ("Sometimes I wonder why did I get in, and sometimes I wonder what I would do without this course. After this course, what?"). Most of them successfully re-organised housework and childcare in order to take part in the course, which led to a reassessment of their priorities, and of the nature of their role in the division of labour at home. In looking back on the course, Rhonda commented:

> I remember that first day when I came home I still had washing all over the place and I thought, oh bloody hell! look at all this...But then after that first week or so it got really easy. The same thing with work experience, you know. I thought, how am I going to do this, I can't go to work...and after a couple of days everything was fine, you know, I had everything down pat. Things that I didn't do, I didn't worry about. I thought, gee, I can fit all this stuff in...But then [after the course], when you've got nothing to do, when it all falls flat...you think, oh gawd, now I've got all this time to go back and do my housework. It made you discover what was important.

Although in making more obvious "what was important" in terms of their work at home, and thereby freeing many of the women from what appeared to them to be a necessary connection between themselves and domestic labour, it seems from their comments that in most of the groups' thinking, childcare is still primarily their responsibility. In the case of the married women, there is little room for re-negotiation of this belief, when the practicalities of their husbands' working lives mean that on a long term basis usually only the women are in a position to fit in with the daily schedules of the children. There is also an important economic dimension to these arrangements, which derives from their husbands' greater earning power. As Jeanette argued earlier in the course:

> ...since he's the one that's working, that's got the full-time job, since he makes more money than me anyway, I'm the one that has to compromise, and so I'm the one who has to stay home with the kids. I wouldn't have had them if I hadn't wanted to stay home for them anyway...

In the months since finishing the course, of all the subjects studied, it seems Women, Work and Society, Confidence Building and Computing provided information and skills most immediately relevant to their education and employment plans. In particular, Women, Work and Society and Confidence Building dealt with issues and concerns they now face in making these sorts of decisions. Women, Work and Society, and Lesley the subject teacher, are referred to in conversation more often than any other subject or teacher and seem to have become synonymous with the course as a whole. Many of the other subjects, particularly the technical subjects, have not proved as useful in dealing with the problems of job seeking and career and retraining decisions. However, most of the group have agreed that while of limited application in these areas, subjects such as Technical Drawing and Science have added to "my general knowledge", and contributed to a greater confidence in "being up on things". Subjects such as Maths and Science have also helped some of the women keep in touch with aspects of their children's education, and become aware of some of the vocational training issues their children will face when making decisions about leaving school.

Although during the course a few of the women, for example Ingrid, Margaret and Angela, were considering jobs in technical occupations such as laboratory work, or in fields where women are not so highly represented, a year after the course all of the group were either in, or considering applying for jobs within the secondary and femininised labour market. This occupational sector holds a greater proportion of those part-time and casual jobs, usually requiring little training or retraining, which accommodate women's domestic workload, and are most easily accessible for women wishing to re-enter the workforce after long absences. None of the group are considering training or working in technical areas normally outside women's experience. Apart from a lack of familiarity with jobs of this nature, the time and money which must be committed, and the kinds of family rearrangements which must be undertaken in order to gain qualifications in these areas are a deterrent against moving into new fields of work.

While the course seems to have failed to interest any of the women in technical occupations sufficiently to overcome these obstacles, this failure is perhaps more a measure of the entrenched nature of sexual divisions in the workforce and education, and of the extent to which these divisions are also a part of the women's self-perceptions, than of

any inadequacies within the course itself. It may also be too early to make such pronouncements about these moves to encourage women into alternative occupations. Although the women themselves may not follow up any of these options, many of them have become interested on behalf of their daughters, and speak of encouraging them in maths and science, and of their own new awareness of the gatekeeping role of these subjects in the links between education and work ("I don't think this really counts for me, but it will for my girls"). And while for the moment many of the women may be studying or working in areas very similar to those they have known in the past, they also seem, as Margaret says, to be keeping their options open and "looking out for something better".

The knowledge and skills that the women acquired during the course appear to have contributed significantly to their moves to re-enter work or further training. It has also changed the manner in which they see themselves, sometimes in ways which are disturbing, and prompted many of them to question and reassess particular aspects of their lives. This process seems to have continued long after the course finished. Many of them appear to be facing the unsettling realisation that they are not the same people they were prior to the course, and can no longer accept some of the terms on which they have conducted their lives. Although they are armed with a great deal more information than before, and have formed a more positive and assertive sense of themselves, the process of bringing these new skills and outlooks together to formulate a future direction remains a difficult one. However, while some of them seem to be struggling to form a set of goals which satisfies these new insights and this greater self-esteem, all have agreed that the course was an important, beneficial and constructive experience. Angela's responses to the course epitomise this sense of the significance of their experiences and the inner struggles which these new ideas and activities have produced. She described the course as "the biggest achievement" in her life:

> When we wrote down 'What Was Your Biggest Achievement'...I thought, coming to this course, because everything else, like, I got married, [but] I wasn't the only person involved in that, you know what I mean? When I moved from country to country...I've always had somebody there, it wasn't just me...I wasn't independent enough to do that. This was something that I just did on my own, you know. Me, I felt, you've got off your backside and did something. And when Darryl said,'No, no, you didn't do that all on your own', I said,'Don't you try to take this one from me'.

However, while the course represented for her a statement of independence and a chance to learn new skills and develop new directions, it has also disturbed some of the ways in which she has accepted many aspects of herself and her life:

> I didn't expect this to come out of it...How can I say it, like something's pushing me to do something [about my life], you know what I mean? And I think it's just an expression of what the course is doing for me...You know, I picked up the paper, I was looking for something to do, and I went along to this course and now I'm feel-

> ing, I'm angry and frustrated and I feel I don't know what I'm worth, you know. And what with that mob [in the course] pushing me from behind and saying,'Look, you've got to get out and find out what you've got', you know what I mean?

It seems from their comments that the NOW course has been successful in helping almost all of the group from Gilmour College re-enter either work or education (and in some cases, both). Almost all of those who have made these moves attribute their success in doing so to the confidence, knowledge and experience they gained from the course. Despite their frustrations with some of the limitations and inadequacies of the course discussed in previous chapters, for most of them the course seems to have been "the thing I needed to get me out, get me going. I know what I've got to do now".

Before they can "get going" however, most of this group of women still have to find solutions to some of the problems they faced prior to the course. If they want to work again there are insufficient childcare services in the community which would enable them to take on full-time employment. Many of them feel they are too old to consider "a career, you know, a big commitment", and are looking for work for "two or three days a week, which would be beautiful, I would like that". Since the average age of the group is thirty-eight, this is more a reflection of social definitions of a working life, interconnections between public and private divisions of labour, and their already considerable workload at home, than of their individual capacity to undertake long-term job commitments. Despite any changes in their perceptions of domestic labour, they are still responsible for housework, which means "if you're lucky you can find a part-time job so you can combine the two. That'd be excellent". Even though they worry about the effect their lack of qualifications has on their job prospects, financial pressures at home are in conflict with the need for upgrading their skills.

The education system seems to be as unresponsive to their needs as the labour market. Within the TAFE system, NOW course subjects are usually not accredited in other courses, and the course as a whole does not articulate with mainstream courses. Access to education is still an issue for mature age women, as many of this group cannot enrol in courses which are full-time one year (or longer) courses, timetabled during after-school hours or at night, or have pre-requisites that cannot be satisfied. Expenses such as books, materials, travel and the recently introduced tertiary fees make education for women on low incomes like Supporting Parents Benefits, and women with children in single income families, almost impossible. Childcare during college hours, either on or off campus, is still a problem, particularly for single mothers who would like to enrol in courses offered only at night. Their age makes many of them "timid about going into a class full of young ones", and as some of their experiences in other courses have shown, the classroom environments and teaching approaches of other sections of the TAFE system do not always take into account their particular learning needs.

Problems such as these are faced by women generally, and arise from processes of discrimination such as sexual divisions of labour in the workforce and at home, unequal access to training and education, definitions of motherhood which impose childcare upon women on the basis of 'natural' abilities, ageism in the labour market, discriminatory work practices and sex-based harassment in the form of intimidatory and alienating work

and education environments. Although all of these issues are recognised by the NOW course in its design, content and teaching practices, it is beyond the capacity of the course and those involved in its delivery to alter significantly discrimination women experience outside the course. However, this does not mean that the changes brought about inside the course are always negated by processes the women encounter outside. The women from the NOW course at Gilmour TAFE *have* re-entered the workforce and the education system, and at the same time have taken with them a more critical and hopefully therefore more empowering understanding of the processes of discrimination.

5. NOW and Then What? : Some Conclusions

In the preceding sections of this report the central issues which arose out of the relationships formed amongst the students and teachers in the Gilmour College NOW course have been considered in some detail. This discussion has also examined some of the possible sources of the women's responses to the course and its content. It is obvious from this discussion that developing and delivering a re-entry course for socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged women is a complex and challenging endeavour. In the concluding section of the report it would be useful to review the major issues that have come to light during the process of evaluation. In the discussion which follows therefore, I shall summarise some of the points concerned with the place of the NOW course in the TAFE system, the nature of the target group, the selection and assessment procedures used in the course, and its curriculum and teaching and learning strategies.

The Now Course and the TAFE System

In the months since the course concluded many of those women in the group who wanted to go on in education have encountered numerous difficulties, some of them within the TAFE system itself, which have frustrated their attempts at continued education and retraining. While the NOW course is effective in introducing mature age women back into education, mainstream TAFE does not seem to recognise their needs sufficiently to allow them to build on the gains they have made through NOW. Neither the NOW course nor its individual subjects articulate with other TAFE courses; course structures and timetabling do not take into account women's outside commitments; mainstream course provision is not built around their particular vocational and educational needs; subject and course pre-requisites do not recognise the experiential learning and expertise of potential mature age students; most teaching and learning techniques favour the learning modes of younger students; there is little income support for women on low incomes; childcare remains a problem; and those campus and classroom environments which are male oriented can perpetuate sex-based harassment through intimidation and alienation of female students. It would appear that considerable changes need to be made in the operations, attitudes and rationales of the mainstream TAFE system for mature age women students to participate equitably in the educational opportunities it offers. To this extent, TAFE is not cost-effective while it continues to undermine the efforts of students in whom it has already made an investment, and to whose educational needs it has stated its commitment.

Improvements in the position of mature age women students in TAFE can be argued for on the basis of equity. Mature age women, especially in single income and single parent families, are also particularly vulnerable in times of economic restructuring, during which effective re-entry into the labour market becomes extremely difficult. These factors provide an additional argument for the development and expansion of specialist programmes and strategies to redress the problems in provision outlined above, to improve women's educational opportunities and through this the security of their position in the labour market. However, to develop appropriate responses to these needs, T.A.F.E itself requires adequate on-going funding from Commonwealth and State sources.

The NOW Target Group

The target group of the NOW course are socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged women. Nearly all the group at Gilmour College were taught a mix of humanities and commercial subjects at school, and generally left school at fifteen to work in offices, shops and factories until they married and had children in their mid-twenties. Since this period in their lives, most have been absent from the workforce for many years. Their chances of re-entering vocational training to update their qualifications and thus their job prospects are influenced in particular by the link between their socio-economic status and their work as caregivers to their children. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that appropriate, free, on-campus childcare is essential if adult women with children (particularly pre-school children), who are in low income or single parent families are to improve their vocational qualifications. For these women, off-campus, fee-for-service childcare is expensive, and usually involves additional transport costs. Adequate income support where necessary is also essential if mature age women from low socio-economic backgrounds, with little or no personal income, are to meet the costs of textbooks, course materials, transport, and student and tertiary fees associated with entering education. Most of the women in the NOW course at Gilmour College argued that money, childcare, the timetabling and length of courses and their pre-requisites were the factors which most affected their chances of gaining some form of further education and training.

One of the most striking features of the NOW course target group is the complex diversity of individual life experiences and personal needs within the group, and at the same time, regardless of where each woman was born and when, the great similarity in personal histories. The simultaneous heterogeneity and homogeneity of the group present course providers with a unique set of problems to take into account when formulating suitable educational objectives. As this evaluation has shown, understanding the needs of the group involves understanding the precise nature of their socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

In terms of their socio-economic disadvantage, it would appear that, as mature age unemployed women with children, all this group share the particular economic vulnerability that is the product of a prolonged absence from the paid labour force. At the same time, however, there is considerable variation in their individual capacity to do something about this. Their age, the ages of their children, their husbands' income and job security, their own level and source of income, their access to free, appropriate, day and evening childcare are some of the factors which affect how and why they will re-enter the workforce. Thus, although all have been absent from employment for a number of years, and almost all seem to come from low income earning families, and are thereby faced with a common economic disadvantage, this disadvantage is not experienced in exactly the same way by all members of the group. It is these differences which affect the kinds of expectations the women have of the course, and their responses to its ability, or lack of it, to meet those expectations.

The common thread of their educational disadvantage seems to derive not so much from the quality of their past education, but from its nature and purpose. Most were streamed into vocationally-oriented courses which led to employment in a typically female section of the labour force. Very few were educated in a manner which gave them access to a wider range of occupations which could offer reasonable career prospects and security.

Their educational disadvantage also seems to stem from the financial circumstances and attitudes of their families, and the number and sex of the children within them, leading in many cases to what could be called an 'interruption' in their education at fifteen, rather than an end. Thus although all of them expressed considerable anxiety about their academic abilities, many in the group were capable of, and often argued for, a more challenging content within the course. Slightly over half the group at Gilmour spoke of being "bright" at school, and of being confident that, "with a bit of practice" they could successfully manage more demanding subject matter. It may be, therefore, that amongst its applicants, women who felt they were successful in their past education are self-selecting into the course. Questions may then be raised about the level of students' educational ability which is being catered for in the course, and the interpretations of 'educational disadvantage' which form part of the definition of the target group, and the rationale for the course.

NOW Course Selection and Assessment Procedures

The selection procedures used at Gilmour College have proved effective, in that the women who took part in the course came within the group for whom the course was designed. However, the selection process was unable to assess fully and accurately the educational levels and needs of all members of the group. The literacy and numeracy problems faced by two of the women could not be given appropriate attention in the course, as these had not been brought to light at the point of entry of the students, and for reasons of their own the women did not wish to disclose them during the course. However, while the course is not equipped to deal with specific literacy and numeracy problems, these women's experiences during the course greatly reduced their alientation from education and their fears about learning, which encouraged them to seek specialist help elsewhere.

During the course at Gilmour, many of the women often spoke of not knowing "where I'm up to" or "whether I can do it". These statements described their need to know firstly, where they and their past educational qualifications stood in relation to the current education system, and secondly, whether they were capable, now that they were adults, of keeping up with to-day's academic requirements. All of them looked to any form of feedback from the teachers, formal and informal, verbal and written, which could answer these two crucial questions. This was the first contact many of them had made with formal education since adolescence, and to them their teachers' assessments of their abilities, their strengths and weaknesses, and their educational standing were necessary if they were to gain the confidence and information about themselves they required to continue. Although all the teachers at Gilmour consistently discussed their progress with the students, there appeared to be a lack of any systematic, regularised form of assessment within each subject, or the course as a whole. As far as the students were concerned, this seems to have been one of the most important gaps in the design of the course. A set of assessment procedures which are self rather than group referenced, allow for differing individual abilities, enable students both to discover and improve upon their capabilities, encourage learning without fostering competition for marks, and promote the possibility of further education in fields appropriate to their interests would increase

the effectiveness of the course. Such procedures may also enable course developers to resolve some of the problems associated with lack of articulation between NOW and mainstream TAFE provision, which arise for on-going students. During this process the NOW course may also offer the mainstream TAFE system useful alternatives in assessment procedures.

The NOW Course Curriculum

The NOW course curriculum was designed as an integrated combination of subjects, to satisfy better the complex vocational, educational and personal needs of its client group. To meet these needs the course has to function successfully on these three levels, and the fact that it consistently does so is a tribute to the skill, expertise and vision of course developers, co-ordinators and teachers. In general the students at Gilmour felt that the subject matter they studied in the course was useful and stimulating. However, as we have seen in previous chapters, there appeared to be some conflict between the students' perceptions of their future directions, and thus their expectations of the course, and the course curriculum. Most of this tension centres around differing definitions of curriculum relevance, and conflicts between short-term and long-term employment goals. For reasons which derive principally from the interconnections between personal circumstances and sexual divisions of labour in the workforce, most of the women set immediate re-entry into the workforce as their first priority in developing employment goals. This can most easily be met within the traditionally female segments of the workforce. Thus they argued that their vocational training needs were for skills relevant to those jobs which, for mature age women in particular, are most readily and immediately accessible. Many of them have felt that re-entry into the workforce which requires training of more than six months to a year at the most would involve expending time and money they do not have, and as some have said, would be better invested in their children. Those who argued most strongly that elements of the curriculum were not relevant to their immediate priorities were also those who gave the need for a second income for their families as their reason for returning to work. The issue of curriculum relevance seemed to be less problematic for those women who enrolled in the course with a view to further education, and amongst this group, in particular those for whom further education was for self fulfillment and personal development.

It is around the issue of curriculum relevance that both the women in the group who want or need to work and the course itself come up against the wider social processes of discrimination against women. Course developers are correct in their analysis of the disadvantage women suffer through the ghettoisation of women in the workforce, and the vulnerability to economic and technological restructuring that this engenders. The long-term strategy of retraining into technical fields which offer more secure and rewarding employment is one obvious solution to this vulnerability. The course also recognises by its provision of science and maths based subjects, the on-going effects in women's lives of past educational discrimination. While many of the women have said they agree with this analysis and the kinds of strategies which follow from it, their individual circumstances are such that they must find more immediate and personally appropriate solutions to these same processes of discrimination. Thus it could be argued that both the women and the course developers are correct in their interpretations of what constitutes a relevant curriculum, even while they differ. The conflict between these differing interpretations is

not the outcome of an inadequate and insensitive assessment of women's educational needs on the part of course developers, nor of misguided analyses of their individual circumstances on the part of the women in the group. Rather, this conflict reflects the complex and invidious discrimination women deal with, and both the course and its students are faced with the difficult task of devising strategies which can simultaneously provide short-term and long-term solutions to mature age women's position in education and employment, which are both personally and collectively viable.

As we have seen, those components of the curriculum which focus on the educational and personal needs of the women appear to be more than satisfactory. While viewed by the women as an important part of their general education, those subjects which focus on the women's vocational needs and on the issue of technical training, that is, the technical subjects such as Science and Tech Drawing, have not been considered relevant to their immediate priorities. However, while the NOW course remains structurally removed from further training in the TAFE system, and TAFE's mainstream provision does not meet its commitment to equality in education, any attempt to resolve the conflicts in the course between the long-term strategy of training for secure employment, and the short-term one of immediate re-entry into female occupations in the secondary labour market, will be consistently undermined.

The NOW Course Teaching and Learning Strategies

From the women's responses to them, it would seem that the teaching and learning strategies used in the NOW course are one of its strengths. The approach to learning taken in the course recognises the present learning needs and styles of mature age women, and the effects of their past learning experiences and their long absence from education. In practice, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the types of daily classroom activities, the process of group formation and the relationships developed between students and teachers. Thus the pedagogy of the NOW course is based on the understanding that students bring their personal history to the classroom, through which they respond to both the subject matter and the way it is taught, and that a co-operative classroom environment based on participation and interaction enhances the capacity and the opportunities to learn. The responses of the students during and after the course endorse this approach, and many have argued that the way they were taught, as much as what they were taught, contributed to the self-confidence which enabled them to re-enter further training.

If we accept the argument that personal circumstances and history, and a co-operative and supportive learning environment, play an essential part in successful learning, (and the evidence from the NOW course suggests that we should), then the pedagogy of the NOW course has implications for TAFE teaching practices as a whole. If TAFE is to make its mainstream provision accessible to mature age women students (and to students from disadvantaged groups generally) then the steps that it takes to accomplish this must take into account the educational needs and learning modes of mature age women. This does not mean, however, that particular teaching and learning methods should be set aside within mainstream TAFE for this particular client group. Methods that are used within the NOW course to facilitate successful learning could contribute to an increased effectiveness in the teaching and learning techniques used within TAFE

generally. Finally, the NOW course teachers and co-ordinators represent a unique pool of specialist skills and expertise within the TAFE system, whose practice and theory remain undocumented. A valuable contribution to the quality of TAFE's educational provision would be a review of the teaching skills and experiences of NOW teachers and co-ordinators in a form which would make these accessible to others within the TAFE system as a whole.

The Department of TAFE in New South Wales has a strong commitment to equality of education, and to remaining responsive to the educational needs of the community as a whole. As this evaluation has shown, the NOW course is a valuable and highly successful example of the types of programmes T.A.F.E has developed in recent years to fulfil these commitments. Within six months of completing the course, half the group from the NOW course at Gilmour College had re-entered the workforce, and over half were involved in or had completed further training. Those who were still engaged in full-time domestic work and childcare had decided to wait for appropriate changes in their circumstances before taking up either of these two options. These moves into education and employment are all the more remarkable when we remember that as a group, these women had little confidence in their chances in the labour market, low self esteem, were considerably out of practice with both job seeking and studying, and anxious about their abilities as students and their place in the education system. Both their words and their actions since completing the course demonstrate the effectiveness of the course, as do its high retention rates generally, and the consistency with which demand for places in the course greatly exceeds supply. It is also remarkable that the course succeeds at all, given that it is a multi-purpose course which must provide avenues into two quite different spheres, that is work and education, for a group which, unlike any other TAFE client group, suffers a complex disadvantage of sex, age, ethnicity, single parenthood, low income, and outdated qualifications. This complexity requires a thoughtfully and skillfully developed curriculum, based on sound educational principles and imaginative and forward-thinking educational practice. Both of these are characteristic of the NOW course, which also derives its strength and effectiveness from the quality and breadth of expertise of its administrators and teachers, and their level of commitment to the interests and needs of the students. The effectiveness of the course also derives from its development as an integrated combination of subjects, which has since been extensively evaluated and monitored both at the head office and college level. Given the complexity of the needs and circumstances of its target group, the innovative nature of its rationale and delivery, and the pressures placed upon it as a multi-purpose educational programme, it is also highly efficient in terms of its financial, material and personnel resources. The ability of the course to bring about such considerable and potentially far-reaching changes in the circumstances of its client group also demonstrates the success of its approach to teaching and learning. The teaching and learning strategies used in the NOW course could successfully be applied in mainstream TAFE, not only because of their quality and effectiveness, but also because they provide one of the means by which TAFE can maintain its commitment to equality in vocational training, and continue to improve its standards of provision.

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